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Edwards, Charlotte

The right place for love.

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*the*  
*Right Place*  
*for Love*

BY CHARLOTTE EDWARDS

McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY, INC.  
New York      Toronto      London

## THE RIGHT PLACE FOR LOVE

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The village of Marshville is a composite of three small towns of the author's acquaintance, each of which contains the family of a doctor, a manufacturer, and a newspaper editor. But the people who inhabit Marshville in this book have no reality except in the mind of the author, and the events herein described never actually happened.

Don bought the first typewriter as a wedding present. Dad asked, "What can I do for you, babe?" Ma washed ten thousand dishes. Tom crossed his fingers for luck. Marde wrote, "Stay with it, kid." And this book was written for them and because of them.





*“Earth’s the right place for love:*

*I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.”*

*from “Birches” by Robert Frost*



In California they call it a freeway. In Pennsylvania it is a turnpike. In this state, despite the fact that each lane accommodates the varied-paced pursuits of three cars going in the same direction, despite the wealth of boulevard which separates the lanes, they just call it a highway.

It is hard to tell, on the face of it, whether Marshville knew a bit of hard luck or good when the surveyors decided to tack the highway, like a baseboard, against the outside of the town. If the wide smoothness of concrete had been pushed through the center of the village, many of the homes would have been ruined and the rumble of trucks would have shaken the foundations of those left untouched. But it would have brought a fresh flow into Marshville. It would have tumbled vigor, as a mountain stream tosses pure water, into the small pool of lives, and the ripples of its force might have disturbed the depths.

In that case, Marshville would have been a town like thousands of towns across the country, with modern store fronts and tourists stopping for Cokes, shakes, and dogs, disturbing the purity of the town's elements, giving it, in however small a way, chipped fragments of an outside world.

Instead, the cars and the trucks, coming southward from the large cities, roar past the flat land, the marshy land, the plowed land—past the Negro shanties and the magnificent old homes, un-restored, lived in for centuries by slowly deteriorating members

of the same families. They come over a great arched bridge which gives them a view of a river and a bay, to the unique smell of tidewater, past Buzzard Creek, sneaking through the grasses, holding in its mystery catbirds and eels and muskrat, to a huge white sign. The black letters on the sign read "Welcome, Marshville."

The truckers, battling down to the south of the state in empty vehicles, racing north against the ripeness of tomatoes, the freshness of eggs, the youth of small dead poultry, know that the gas stations, the diner, the By-the-Willows Inn do not comprise the village. They know vaguely, unless a broken axle or a double-tire blowout has made their knowledge more specific, that Marshville lies off to the right somewhere, hitched to the highway as a puddle overflows a ditch.

But the tourists, heading for the fashionable antiquity of the beach resorts or deep-sea fishing, if they think of it at all, think of Marshville as those buildings shackled together in one block along the wide highway.

If, being tired or hungry, one of them were to swing his big car right at the By-the-Willows, he would find himself almost at once in the heart of the town. He would pass, before he reached the Four Corners, five falling-down shanties, one immense colonial house, a lumber yard, a liquor store, and a beauty parlor. Stopped for the light, he would see on one corner the grocery store, on another the Deluxe Hotel, on a third the paper store, and on the fourth, facing him to his right, somehow endowed with authority and eminence, the drugstore.

If anyone were to walk out of the swinging drugstore doors at that moment, he would appear, to the tourist, to be covered with the same patina of dust which seems to paint the Deluxe Hotel. His face would be clean, his cotton shirt crisp from starch and a hot iron, but the dust would be there, as it is everywhere in Marshville.

The steps of the Deluxe Hotel are covered with it, although the tourist could bend down over the bulge of his well-fed waist-

coat, slide his hand along the railings of the porch, and have it come away only minutely smudged. The square glass box that sits, in season, before the grocery store gives the same effect. Within it lie the red and oozing bodies of the small animals valued everywhere for their skins, valued by some of the village for the ripe lusty taste of their flesh; it is topped by the brittle sign, "Fresh mushrats."

It is the paper store that seems to carry the most dust upon it, grayed in its shingles, grayed on its old floors. Even the peanut machine, relic of another era, but putting forth a fresh inimitable odor, seems coated with fine patterns of tan glaze. The owner, leaning in the doorway, his gray curly hair tangled with heat, his clear blue eyes reflecting the sky, is dustier than his business. Behind him his wife, reaching for a box of snuff for her colored customer, is a female replica of the man with whom she has spent her life since she was fifteen. The tourist can see that at a glance, if he chooses.

From these Four Corners the center of the town stretches out four thin wires, four short wires, too, because they lose themselves after a block each way, in trees, in houses, in old brick sidewalks that snare strange feet. But for the length of the wires there moves, breathes, and has its being, the *Marshville Herald*, oldest newspaper in the state, the ice-cream parlor, the movie, the pool-room, the undertaker's thickly painted quarters, and an amazing and beautiful pillared white house, with a half block of boxwood hedge—a maze a century old, clipped to a sixteenth of an inch evenness, green as a forest and as calm.

Over all of it, the downtown section of Marshville, lies the moating of dust, too thin to be trapped by touch or sight, an unreal film before the eyes. The film of years.

The unwary tourist, caught in this film, seeing the people moving on the streets, not knowing which were the outer, lesser ripples, which the tight, unmoving inner circle of the citizenry, were he particularly discerning, might note a thing that is not true of cities. Might note the absence of time in this small town, so that

the era could be a space between wars, any space between any wars, or it could be in the midst of a time of conflict. No difference to Marshville, except that fewer young men roamed the streets on Saturday nights, and parents studied the exact moment of the postman's advent.

With such timelessness a story can be picked up anywhere. It can start with the turning of a wheel, the steering wheel of a small battered gray roadster, switching off the highway, heading, not by accident, into the middle of Marshville.

It doesn't matter to the tourist where it starts. He is unaware of the story, just as he is unaware of the people. Their faces are smooth to him, unwritten, unfeatured, with the blankness that eggs turn to the world, and human beings to each other when they pass each other by. He has no need to read them, just as he has no curiosity about the sign tacked conspicuously in the paper-store window.

DUE TO THE DEATH OF EDITOR SLY SOME MONTHS AGO, THE "MARSHVILLE HERALD" HAS SUSPENDED PUBLICATION UNTIL THE ARRIVAL OF THE NEW OWNER. [BULLETIN TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

# 1

When Anne and Paul Beecham left the sleek suburb of the city where they had met, married, been happy and unhappy, Anne felt that their destination was the ends of the earth. It was, she knew quite clearly, the end of a way of life.

She sat with the sun pushing against her face, against the scarf she had tied over her hair, watching the hot miles go by, letting the city recede, putting nothing as yet into its place. The small gray roadster, piled high in the rumble with the belongings that hadn't seemed to fit into any of the boxes or barrels, moved steadily and willingly under Paul's hands. Anne felt the weight of those belongings. She felt the weight of Paul's hands on the wheel. Feeling them, a weak revulsion shook her, and she shivered a little.

Paul asked, looking straight ahead, "Not cold, certainly."

Anne's light, clear voice said, "No, Paul, not cold."

Paul glanced quickly at her but didn't answer.

Leaning back, her head against the worn hot leather of the seat, Anne stared at the sky through her dark glasses. Filtered, it was a deep theatrical blue with off-white clouds. It seemed to have no interest in the traffic-snarled, fly-snarled, emotion-snarled line of cars that oozed out of the city's narrow streets, crossed a wide muddy river filled with soiled utilitarian boats, and wound

through a congestion filled with stench of chemicals, stench of hopelessness.

Staring at the sky, Anne told herself that the world could not be as darkly colored, as morbidly stinking as she saw it. Because a woman has lost her faith in her husband, in the marriage which had once seemed so right, because she is moving away from those two children who never became children, who were only two packets of beginning bones, beginning hearts, beginning hands and eyes and faces, does not mean that the sky and the cities, the country and the highway, are red and bloody and doomed.

She smiled a little, a twist only of what was normally a tender mouth. The melodrama of the words of her thoughts had always been a wry secret, unshared with anyone, unless it might be God. That there was even a God, Anne doubted at the moment, although that doubt, unlike her carefully nurtured hatred of Paul, and her carefully buried longing for those two small nothings, she felt sure would pass with time.

Only it wasn't fair to call it hate for Paul. You couldn't label it at all. That was the trouble, of course, the thing that made it so hard. Before, before it was a pure emotion, undiluted, comprehensible, complete, as natural as sunshine, and as beautiful. Her love then, at first and all the years until this one, was made up of many things, for all of its seeming simplicity.

They had come together easily, there in the college library. The first thing Anne had noticed about Paul was that he was so tall he had to hunch over his books. The second was that he was so shy it took skill to make him answer her at all. The third was that he looked lost and untended, and somehow hungry. By that time she was lost herself.

She stirred restlessly and searched for passing scenery on which to set her eyes and mind. Those long nights she had taught herself one thing. It was contrast that broke the heart, contrast between the way it had been and the way it was now. If she didn't think about those first days, didn't allow herself to see Paul's face bent toward hers, in passion, in amusement, in shared pain



those two times at the hospital, she could get along pretty well. The thing to do, if she intended to see this marriage through, was not to think of her husband at all.

That was not one of the things Paul had expected. At first he had waited for her to blaze up, to say, "I'm leaving you." She could feel it in the way he set his shoulders, the small-boy fear in his eyes. But even seeing it in him, there was no such feeling in her. In the home from which she came there was respect for the very fact of marriage itself. It had, in the long run, little to do with happiness. A vow taken was a vow kept. As simple as that and not to be confused with any modern-day thinking. Even when her mother and father quarreled, as they had sometimes, Anne was bothered only by their voices, their words, never by a further dread that perhaps their home would disintegrate.

Things like that stay with you. Sure, she told herself in those long nights, you're young and maybe you could be happier away from Paul, putting him out of your mind without the constant presence of him in the socks you pick up, the shirts you iron, his face across the narrow dining table, trying to make conversation about small items that won't touch too close. Perhaps you could, but a vow made is a vow kept.

It was that search for conversation that led her to the ad.

Paul had said, "What I'm to do now is one of our problems, Anne. In some ways, the toughest one."

She shied away from his words. They could lead anywhere. They could lead to the fact that he was probably washed up in teaching. Scandal flies from coast to coast, and the faculty clique is no different than any other. They could lead to further discussion of the biggest problem, and of how it could be, might be, solved. That she could not stand.

She said, instead, brightly, as she was learning to do, "I saw something in the paper today—wait—I'll find it."

She jumped up and away, relieved for the moment to put even a room's space between them. The paper was scattered in Paul's untidy way, steppingstones from chair to chair. It used to

amuse her. Rather endearing. Now she felt a prick of annoyance. She gathered up the advertising section, folded it neatly, brought it back to the table, and searched, one long finger riding down the columns.

Paul said, "There aren't many jobs I'm fitted for. I've been huddled up with books for most of my life—"

Huddled with other things, too, the bitter part of her said, the new part, the part that was making a battleground of her, where old love and new hate fought for domination and the possibility of truce seemed remote.

"Here it is," she interrupted him. "For sale, weekly newspaper. Small town, Southern state. Completely equipped. Cheap for cash to settle deceased's bills. Contact Evans Realty Company." She looked up at Paul abruptly, then read out the address.

There was silence in the room. At last Paul said, "I couldn't tackle something like that."

"You've taught journalism for years."

He shrugged. "That," he deprecated. "Theory only and to kids practically—"

She said, trying not to think about the kids, about one kid, one redheaded female kid, "It would be a challenge."

"It would take all our savings or more," he argued.

Anne let it drop. She cleared the table and took a shower and went to bed with her book. It was close to midnight when she heard the hesitant click of Paul's typewriter.

He tried to talk himself out of it. He read the letter from a Martha Evans over and over. "The price is right," he acknowledged. "But a strange town, strange people—what do I know about a linotype—"

"You'd learn."

"But sight unseen—"

"You can go and see," Anne suggested.

He held the letter still in his hands. He shook his head. "No," he said thoughtfully. "If I take time to think, to look it over, I'll never have the courage to make the jump. I know myself that

well—" He looked straight at her. "Anne, you'll try it with me?"

She nodded, avoiding his eyes. "I'll do it with you," she corrected.

He crossed over to kiss her on her swiftly turned cheek. "You're quite a girl," he said softly. "Quite a girl."

He had it all wrong, but she couldn't explain. She'd never be able to explain why, what it meant to try to still the constant nervousness, to try to find a place inside herself where she could live alone, to stick when every breath screamed that it wanted out.

"There's a lot to do," she said briskly. "Even a small apartment takes a lot of tearing up."

She set to it. It helped the nervousness to be busy, and she was right. It took a lot to tear up an apartment. More, in some ways, than it took to tear apart a life, or a heart. More time, anyhow.

MARTHA EVANS, OF EVANS REALTY COMPANY, SAYS THAT THE "MARSHVILLE HERALD" HAS BEEN PURCHASED BY AN OUT-OF-STATE MAN, WHO EXPECTS TO MOVE TO TOWN SOON. [BULLETIN TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

## 2

Paul said, "We're over the state line now. It won't be long." His voice sounded fogged.

"You're excited, aren't you?"

Paul considered her question. He slid his eyes to her face and away again. How her eyes tip up at the corners, he thought, how high her cheekbones are.

He wondered, with a lost sort of awe, how he had been able to do the thing he had done to Anne. To some wives, perhaps. The slovenly ones, or the uncaring. Or to the sophisticated, who repaid disloyalty with a matching and almost amused unfaithfulness. There were plenty of women who would have thought nothing of it.

He tried again, as he had so many times in the past few months, to work up an anger against Anne. Anger would give him a cloak to wear, a protection from the way she looked at him, impersonal and reserved, as if they had met at a party one year, then again the next, and she found it difficult to recall their previous meeting. But he couldn't muster its force. It didn't matter that some psychologists believed you could most easily hate the one you wronged—just because you had wronged them. Certainly it was not so with him.

Anne repeated, "Aren't you?"

He smiled. "A little," he said in his slow exact way. "A small town is a new approach. There are bound to be all sorts of new problems, new human equations—"

Listen to me, the lines of his mind wrote, talking about human equations when I have failed in the greatest of all.

"It will seem strange at first," Anne said thoughtfully.

"You're bound to make new friends," Paul said hurriedly, caught even now, even with the train carrying their belongings, with the piled-up rumble seat, with the miles behind them, in the fear that Anne might turn to him at last. That she might say, "Stop here, Paul. I can't go any farther with you. I'm going back and away."

She didn't say it. She said nothing. It was a silence that had grown sickeningly familiar to both of them in the past bracket of time. Born of the things that must not be said, or could not be, or wouldn't allow themselves to grope upward through tight throats.

Paul tried to reach his wife in the silence. He made a tangible thing of his thoughts and forced them toward her, as if they might puncture the bones of her head and become part of the whirls of her brain. Or, more nearly, as if they might tear through the scar tissue that had grown around her heart, ripping it away, leaving the warm throbbing sweetness of the source of her revealed once again to him.

A man like I am, Paul told her inaudibly, finds himself suddenly facing a temptation he never thought would be tempting. If I had been a handsome boy, Anne, and the girls had chased me, the flattery of it would have been known and consequently nothing. But you know what I was. Gangling, awkward, shy, and my long nose always in books. The biggest miracle of my life was when you looked at me twice.

Men who teach in girls' schools, he ruminated, should be wise with years and sapped by them. It's not very smart, either, to fence in several hundred young girls, their energy leaping high, their imagination, their romantic folderols seeking any object,

any object, even a queer duck of thirty who tries to teach them journalism.

They were soft and young and nuzzling, and he felt like a father to most of them. Most of them treated him that way. But there was one who couldn't treat any man, even her own grandfather, impersonally and with respect due to age.

Telling Anne about it, nauseated because he hadn't gotten there first—because the request for his resignation came first—he had said, "I've wanted to talk it over with you for a long time." Which was strangely true. "I wanted to hear you laugh at it, and make me laugh, too."

Anne sat across from him, her hands still, her eyes which usually recognized a good joke, seeing nothing funny in this one, nothing funny in him.

He palmed his hands outward. "It was a crazy thing, Anne," he tried to explain. "I would tell myself over and over that I wouldn't see her alone again. Then I'd find myself trying to work things out so that—" He stopped. There didn't seem to be much sense in going on.

Anne spoke slowly, finishing his sentence. "So that you would see her again, even for a minute, just for a glance."

Paul leaned forward. "Yes," he agreed eagerly, a ripe good sense of his wife's understanding rising in him. "That's how it was. And one day she was walking to town. I stopped and offered her a lift—"

He was carried on in comfort, putting this thing into the third person, seeing it for what it was, foolish and shameful and ridiculous.

"After that we took rides out into the country after classes—"

He looked at Anne. Surely she would surmise the rest of it. The first kiss, offered so blatantly, the greater offers, the knowledge that here in a redheaded kid was more promiscuity, more expertness than he, the thirty-year-old professor, had ever known.

His heart slowed and his hands began to shake. Anne's eyes were slanted away from him and her mouth was unrecognizable,

twisted into a visual sob, moored at the corners by disillusion. He leaned back in his chair, tired to his last breath.

Anne managed to make words come out of that strange mouth at last. She spoke in a voice he had never heard before, and one which he prayed he would never hear again. She said, "You can't tell me there was nothing to it, of course. Thank you for being honest, Paul. At least."

"Honest," Paul repeated after her. Then he went to pieces. He heard his own voice, faraway and thick as sorghum, crying, "I'm so ashamed, so ashamed."

After a while he felt Anne's hands on his head and his face. There was tenderness in them, the tenderness she had saved for those two lost and unborn children. "Now, now," she murmured. "Hush."

It takes a long time to get over a scene like that. The school was decent. The girl stayed. But Paul was fired, as quietly as possible, of course.

Paul sighed, muffled it, changed it to a yawn. "Tired," he commented.

The trouble, his thoughts went on, was that the tenderness of Anne's hands that night was an instinctive thing. A motion she would have made to anybody, any animal, torn beyond its ability to bear the moment. Once having made that gesture, her hands returned to herself and the small doors began to shut, one after the other, with final clicks, until she was locked inside, and to search for her was to search for minute keys or bump one's head against those doors.

The rank marsh odor came to Paul's nostrils. "There's something familiar about it," he said.

Anne pointed to the big white sign. "Welcome, Marshville," she read. She sighed and Paul knew she was unaware of her own drawn breath.

He pulled his shoulders back. He said, definitely, "Trust me, Anne. From now on, please trust me."

She seemed unsurprised at his words. "I trust you."

"I know how it must have been for you." Paul felt impelled to say it all before they turned into this new place. "But you can't go on suffering—"

"I'm not suffering!"

Paul swallowed. The closed door again. "What I mean is, we have a fresh slate—you know? Any marriage is worth forgetting one mistake."

Anne's head was back on the worn seat. Her eyes were closed, as if she didn't very much care what Marshville looked like. Her voice was murmurous. "Why do you go on about it, Paul?" she asked impersonally. "I've forgotten it, except when you remind me."

"I—Darling—" Paul stopped.

The hell with it, he thought in bitter abruptness. A man can go on begging just so long. To forgive, a thing has to be forgotten. The hell with it. He was a bastard. Okay. So he was a bastard. You couldn't make a woman see that because once you'd been a louse you were a better man for it. That you knew where you stood and probably always would. That you had more to offer her, the fullness, the complete choice, than you'd ever had before. That now was the time for her to open her arms and her heart and let you come to her, appreciative of her warmth and goodness. You couldn't tell any woman that, most likely, and have her believe it. The hell with it.

He swung the small car violently around the corner of By-the-Willows Inn. The fog through which he stared, caused by anger or by tears or both, blurred the outlines of the shacks and the big old houses. This was a new deal. He'd make a place here. He'd find himself here, with or without his wife.

But as he slowed at the Four Corners, the fog blown away by his defiance and the beating sun, he knew how Anne felt, knew it as an ache in his own bones. She had wanted those babies so much because she loved him and she wanted to reproduce that love, tangibly, immortally. But she didn't have the babies and now she felt that she didn't have him, that she didn't have any-



thing, even her good, gay mind and her strong, simple faith.

As he pulled up to the high curb, his fender scratching like a giant's nail on a blackboard, as he slid out from under the wheel and walked toward the narrow store that had a weathered sign reading "Newspapers, Magazines, Smokes, Snuff," over its bleached door, he thought, Sometimes it can be a terrible thing for a man to love his wife.

MR. WALTER ARRINGTON, PRESIDENT AND OWNER  
OF THE ARRINGTON KNITTING MILLS, SPENT  
WEDNESDAY IN THE CITY ON BUSINESS. [BULLETIN  
TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

### 3

Each morning when Margaret Arrington woke up in the big back room of the Pillars, she moved her head with great care from side to side. She probed for the twist in her neck, the tender spot behind her ear, the finger of sharpness down her forehead. On the rare days when they were not there, a kind of ecstasy would fill her. It was such a good thing to know that for twelve hours, fourteen, maybe even twenty-four, the gripping headache would be held at bay.

On the morning that Anne and Paul Beecham arrived in Marshville, Margaret could find no essence of threat. Her neck moved smoothly, sweetly, as when she had been young. Her forehead felt clear and cool, and the coils of her brain seemed oiled with health. She stretched herself thin and tall against the fine sheets. Her hand sought out her flat, youthful stomach and patted it kindly. She smiled. She was unaware of the wrinkles which the lift of her lips brought to her thin cheeks.

Sara was beside her bed before she saw her.

"I wish you wouldn't sneak up on me like that," Margaret said fretfully.

Sara's grin was the proverbial slash of white in her dark face. Contrasted against the lightness of Margaret's voice, her own words, when they came, were rich with inflection and dusky. She moved her face near, so that Margaret could read it.

"Honey," she said, "I dearly love to surprise you, there by yourself and thinking and no headache today, huh?"

They shared a smile, like breaking bread together. This Sara, Margaret thought, who had been young and awkward when she herself was young and afraid. This Sara, who had seen her through the years, learning as she learned, only different things. How to make light biscuits and wild duck with rice, and care for a sick baby. How to serve at the candlelit table in the great dining room, and how to keep Walt from having a third cup of coffee simply by forgetting to bring it to him.

Sara walked now to the windows and pulled the draperies. The heat moved toward them a pace and stopped, cooled by the thick brick walls.

Margaret pushed herself back against the puffed pillows, squinted, straightened the tray Sara set before her, and wrinkled her nose at the dry toast, the half grapefruit. Then she considered her flat stomach, her lean hips, and spooned the fruit gratefully.

Sara came back to stand beside the bed, hands on ample hips. "Hennery wants to know can he fix them roses tomorrow 'stead of today? Lazy good-for-nothing."

Margaret's eyes, tight around the edges, relaxed as she nodded.

Sara looked down at her hands. "Gonna sock that man someday," she muttered.

"Why?"

Sara shook her head. "No-good loafer," she said distinctly. "Don't know why I pay him mind."

Margaret laughed, a pleasant upward curve of sound. "Go on, you and Hennery should have been married years ago. Children and grandchildren and you still act like adolescents."

Sara frowned over the big word, then her face smoothed like a child's, and light poured from her eyes and teeth. "Not me," she chortled. "I like this goosy-gander stuff." She poured another cup of coffee from the slim china pot and, rocking with her own joke, made her way out of the room.

The smile stayed on Margaret's lips. Clear as yesterday, the way she saw all of yesterday's scenes, came a younger Sara, creamy as chocolate, slender as a trumpet vine, dark eyes filled with a vocabulary her untrained mind could not word.

They were in the little house on Sassafras Street then. Margaret sat before the fire, heavy with the weight of Nancy, content, justified somehow. Sara stood before her and said in her deep young voice (and Margaret could see her then, could see every blessed movement), "I got to leave you, Mrs. Arrington. I got to quit."

Margaret looked up at her. "No," she said, almost sharply. "You've been with me over a year, Sara. We're friends—"

Sara rubbed the pink palms of her hands together. "I don't want to bring no disgrace to you, Mrs. Arrington," she said quietly. "I'm getting a baby, and Marshville quality won't like your keeping me on—even if you would—which you wouldn't."

I should have known it, Margaret thought. "I'm getting a baby myself," she answered quietly. "And you and Hennery could be married—"

The shake of Sara's head rippled her smooth cheeks. "No, ma'am," she said firmly. "I don't want to lose him."

"Lose him?" Margaret echoed. "Seems to me that would be a fine way to make sure you didn't."

Sara reached for words. "Get him sure of me, out the window he goes. Like a bird. Let him think he's got me, he don't want me."

"You're a funny little girl," Margaret said slowly. "Surely he knows he has you—in your condition."

Sara snickered. "My condition," she murmured, "could be, maybe couldn't be, Hennery." She stopped, shocked.

Margaret felt a little shocked herself. "You mean—you—"

Sara said definitely, "No, ma'am. I'm true to that man like heaven above. Only he don't know it. That keeps him dancing. Sure does."

Margaret said, "I want you to stay. We won't worry about

Marshville quality. I know a thing or two about Marshville quality." She smiled.

Sara smiled back. "Me, too," she agreed. Then she put on her service manners. "I'll try to keep to the back of the house, Mrs. Arrington," she promised. "I'll only miss a couple days."

Margaret watched her go. At the door Sara turned. "I'll make it up," she vowed fervently. "All my life I'll make it up. You never have to lift a finger to do for yourself."

Remembering the small scene now, Margaret thought that Sara had more than made it up. Sometimes, when the headache came, she was certain that Sara was the only one in the world who cared.

How different we are, she thought, pulling herself from the bed, wrapping the creamy satin negligee around her, peering at her finely molded figure in the full-length mirror. From the side, from the back, it looked like a young girl's. Only standing facing herself, almost touching the glass, could she find the years, all of them, in the long oval of her face, the white of her hair.

She was really young when it started to turn. Walt had said, "I like it. It makes you look like a child playing grownup. Keep it that way."

How can you stand in a white satin negligee before a mirror and feel a kiss, years old, upon your lips?

She shook her head gently. Sara and her goosy-gander stuff. But it's worked for her. Hennery was a fine young buck, and all the girls wanted him, yet he's stayed with Sara and shared full responsibilities for every one of their children.

Walt was a fine young buck, too. What a ridiculous comparison! Surely she had never played goosy-gander with Walt. At first maybe, for a little while. But after Nancy's birth her eyes began to trouble her, and Walt was such a rock, so kind.

There was that small room upstairs in the house on Sassafras Street. Big enough it was for Walt's drawing board and the high stool he sat on. Plus room enough for her chair. Nights when the dishes were done and nobody dropped in, Margaret

used to tap lightly on the door of the small room. She would push it open, knowing even as she touched it that Walt wouldn't hear her. That he would be bent over the board, the round study lamp making a halo of his rumpled hair, the green eye shade turning his normally ruddy color to a sickly off-white. He wouldn't look up, she was prepared for that. But he didn't mind her coming. She was welcome to sit there, with her knitting, listening to the small scratch of his pencil on the thick paper, the whisper of his eraser, the in-pull and outthrust of his steady breathing.

"Time for bed, Walt," she had said at first, rising, stretching, hoping he would turn to look at her, to see somehow in the very lines of her body the question she was too proud to ask.

"You run along," he'd say back. "I have to finish this plan." And he didn't see her. He didn't see her at all.

She brought it out into the open once, one morning when the little itch of pain had kept her awake most of the night. She said, "Walt, this isn't much of a life. You work too hard. We should be together while we're young."

There was clear surprise in his eyes above the fluted rim of her inherited china coffee cup. "We are together, Margaret, I'm practically always home in my free time—"

"But you're not here—not really—" She shrugged and sighed. It was hard to say.

Walt put the cup down. "Margaret," he said seriously, "you married a poor man. But I'm going to amount to something. That one-room factory will be a big thing someday. It takes study. It takes planning. And it's all for you, you know. You and the kid." At such times there was a tension, an excitement to him. He got up and came around to her. He laid his hand on her hair, just turning then, and naturally curly. "I keep my promises." He kissed her and walked out.

Promises. Down by the creek, before they were married. That was the promise he meant. "You'll never want for a thing, sweetie. You've given up your fancy city home, your boarding

schools, your fripperies, but I'll give them to you again—those things you've had—”

The sentence faded. He has, she thought. She put out one hand and touched the mirror. He's given me a whole life made up of pretties. But why does the house on Sassafras Street, the years-ago things he said to me, the old way he laughed, why do they stay so bright? Look at your home now, she told herself, and count out the figurines, the books, the clothes, the linens. Look where you live right now and stop—

She turned abruptly toward the great old wardrobe in the corner. All in the room's details, all in the world's, were dimmed by her weak eyes, but shapes stood out clearly enough. She pulled out the lilac linen dress, the lilac linen shoes. It was twenty minutes after ten. She put on her clothes, adding up her day, task after task, so that it might be full.

The shopping to do, and perhaps a good long walk before lunch. Somebody in for tea. The decorations to plan for the Garden Club exhibit. Some swatches of material to match. By the time she and Sara had planned dinner it would be a good day.

She walked to the window and stood in the square of sunshine between the dark red satin drapes. Outdoors it was brilliant, with a morning sheen that touched against the pupils of her eyes, deep, with a quick joy that almost hurt.

Crossing to the door she heard a sound in Walt's room. She stopped, swung around and walked in.

“Walt?” she asked. “You're still home?”

When she was close she saw that he leaned toward the mirror, folding down the tabs of his collar neatly. He said, “Damned tie. Can't get it straight. Of course I'm home. Can't you see?”

“Sometimes I can't—quite.”

He turned around and smiled. “Don't mind me, sweetie. Got a lot on my mind. Have an appointment in the city at noon. No sense going to the plant.”

Margaret said, “If you'd told me—I could have gone with

you. I haven't a thing to do." It was true. Even after adding up all the little tasks, still it was true.

Walt wasn't listening. He pulled on the fine tan gabardine coat, tucked a crisp handkerchief into the breast pocket, checked his wallet, his keys.

Margaret walked up to him and lifted her face. "Good luck in town."

He patted her shoulder. He set a small kiss, like a seal, upon her cheek. "I'll be late for dinner."

"Oh—"

"But I'll bring you something to make up for it," he put in quickly.

Toss a dog a bone, good doggie, Margaret thought, and was shocked. She made her face properly enthusiastic.

"Wonderful," she cried. "You're a darling."

Walt patted her again. Margaret felt, even with his hand on her, that he was already on the way to the city.

What's the matter with me this morning? she thought disgustedly. She watched Walt fade out of range, as all things did, sighed, straightened, laughed at herself, and went down the broad, gleaming stairs slowly, regally, the mistress of the Pillars, Marshville's social arbiter.

No headache today. Not a sign. What more could she ask?



MR. AND MRS. PAUL BEECHAM ARRIVED IN TOWN THIS MORNING. MR. BEECHAM IS THE NEW EDITOR OF THE "MARSHVILLE HERALD." [BULLETIN TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

4

Walt opened the front door and stepped out of the Pillars. The air hit him a heavy blow. He sucked its humid heat into lungs that already felt tired. He stood for a moment before his home.

The white pillars towered over him, leaning forward somehow, in the eager sun. The fanlight above the door was ripe with color, the door itself hand-carved into white elegance. The windows sparkled, revealing a small portion of the rich draperies behind them.

He felt a stirring of satisfaction that this place in the middle of the town, larger, more solid, more gracious than any other, was his, that his imagination had seen the possibilities in the run-down old house, that his persuasion, his money, had torn it from the owners. It didn't matter that they had been born to it, and he had earned it with cash only. Never in its heyday had the Pillars looked as he had made it look. With Margaret's help, he added.

He stepped down to the sidewalk. Funny thing about Margaret. She was such a child, such a pattering, babbling, light-minded child. She loved possessions and lit up like a Christmas tree for a new bauble. She lived on delicate bits of gossip, unusual dishes, company for dinner. But given a room to decorate, she turned entirely adult, very serious, and did a fine, complete job. Good taste, always. Of course she has, he told himself, smil-

ing a little, turning away from his domain. She'd chosen Walter Arrington, hadn't she?

There was a bustle to midmorning Marshville that he liked. Other times of day it seemed to hold only one purpose at a time. Early morning, the commuting men of the town nodded sleepily to each other on the way to the one local which took them to the city. Dinnertime, there was the same direct push, in reverse, with children having a last before-dark run in the streets. But in the center part of the morning Marshville came to life, and people Walt didn't see any other time took it over. Bright colors of women's cotton dresses, calling voices, sometimes he felt as if he owned it all.

As in a way he did. He swung his glance down toward the end of Main Street. He couldn't see the plant, of course, except in his mind. There it lay lovingly, as it had for years, growing as he had made it grow, reaching out from the dreams of Walt Arrington, to become a reality. Half the people in town were supported by the Arrington Knitting Mills. They had come in from the meager farms or changed from the small jobs which the village offered them. They had learned the process which Walt had developed, and in time their sons came to work at the mills, and their daughters.

Because of the mills, Walt thought, walking slowly away from his home, there were new pews in the church and new books in the library. There was the double row of houses on the west side of town, and the school for the colored children. One thing leads to another, he had always believed, and it was there to see, on mornings like this, when he had time to add things in his mind.

He pulled up a deep satisfied breath. The years had been full, every nook and cranny, of work and planning and building and creating. It had taken all of him, and it had added to him. Sometimes, working late at night in the seeming vastness of the quiet buildings, with his light the only light, his mind the only mind,

his fingers the guiding hands, he was hard put to find the border where the mills ended and Walt Arrington began.

The open doors of the stores let out the subtle odors of fresh baking, vegetables with earth still upon them, the plushy smell of berries, and the brittle, reaching odor of fish unreconciled to sudden death, trailing deep slime and rank water. Walt sniffed them all, one at a time, until they added up to an aromatic cacophony, loud in his nose, and somehow exciting. He stood at the curb, his eyes on the Deluxe Hotel. Ancient of days, he thought, fading and barely respectable. Yet he was glad that it still stood.

From the door a burst of laughter lilted toward him. It was followed, as he knew it would be, by the sight of the Southern Belles.

"Why, Walt," they called, almost in unison, "whatever are you doin' home this late time of day?"

It was Sue Lee who added, "And my, my, doesn't it seem right good to glimpse such a handsome man? Makes this heat almost bearable, I do declare."

He walked toward them, amused and pleased with the admiration in their helter-skelter eyes. Sue Lee and Sally Mae, fifteen years ago, along about the time he acquired the Pillars, brought themselves, their ruffles, their high, skittish voices and what money they had, to Marshville. They bought the Deluxe Hotel, then a thriving concern. And look at it now, he thought, reaching out both hands to enclose the two aging, fluttery ones extended to him, as battered as these two, and as soiled.

Margaret always said she felt she ought to scrub everything after they left, and she invited them only to her biggest parties. Heavy make-up covered the uplifted faces. Sue Lee had a leopard hat perched on her graying curls, wayward sausages, no two traveling in the same direction. Sally Mae's hair hung limp to her thin shoulders, like a faded rainbow shading from white to brown to bright, false yellow.

Walt bowed low and released the bony fingers. He thought his own felt vaguely gritty from the contact.

"I declare," Sue Lee tinkled, "you're a charmer, sir, a regular Southern gentleman charmer."

"Everybody says so," Sally Mae added. "Don't they, sister? Everybody says, 'Isn't that Walt Arrington the most charmin' man in all the whole world?'" "

Sue Lee gave her a cold look. "I was just goin' to make such a statement myself," she reproved.

Sally Mae withered.

Walt grinned delightedly. There were a lot of them like this in Marshville, he thought. People who didn't figure in his personal social life, but who gave him a feeling of power, of freedom whenever he stopped to talk with them.

He managed to turn his back on them finally and cut diagonally across the street. A shabby gray roadster, the back stacked with luggage, stood before the paper store. Walt inspected the out-of-state license, the streaked dirt on the rear fenders. Somebody lost from the highway again. With the secret smile which seemed so much a part of this day still on his face, his eyes halted at the scarf of the woman in the car. As he sauntered slowly around the side, she raised an arm and pulled it from her head.

Walt stood still for a moment, caught in a strangeness he could not name. The woman's hair was pale, straight and pale, and held with a wide silver clip at the base of her neck. It shone with cleanliness, fine, frail hair, asking for the hand of desire to tangle in its satin, the hand of compassion to smooth it, the hand of friendship to put small wisps, caught by the wind, into place.

A compulsion and a reluctance filled Walt Arrington. The need to walk quickly to the car, to look straight into the face that went with the hair—and a reluctance because it would be too bad if the face were not right. As Margaret's face gave the lie, always, to her supple, youthful body.

He forced himself to move slowly. Abreast of the seat he swung his eyes to the woman. He smiled, the easy smile that had earned him friends, admirers, difficult customers.

She did not smile back. Her eyes, from that distance, seemed amber, slanted slightly on the lower lids, and were apparently looking right at him. Her cheekbones, rising close to her eyes, seemed slanted too, and high. It was all he had time to notice, before he swung into the door of the paper store. Once inside he turned, sheltered by the sudden dimness, to look out again. He hadn't seen her mouth.

It was still and very pale red and on its curves was written a fatigue that had nothing to do with physical exhaustion. Standing still, staring at that mouth, Walt knew that the woman hadn't ignored his smile. She hadn't seen him at all. She was sleep-walking in a world that had no substance for her.

Embarrassed suddenly, he turned and became aware of the voices behind him.

Poppy leaned against the counter, his deep blue eyes puckered at the corners with thought. "I don't rightly know off-hand," his soft voice murmured.

Mommy said, pushing back on her forehead in a gesture that was known to the whole village, "No outlander's come here for such a time, for a fact. Each house got its people."

The third voice was Northern, cultured and tense. "Would you recommend the hotel then?" it asked. "At least till we make some arrangements?"

Mommy and Walt spoke together, quickly and sharply. "No," they cried.

Poppy gave forth his shy smile. As always, the store seemed a little brighter for it.

"Walt," he explained, "maybe you could help this gentleman."

The man turned then. His height made Walt feel short and stocky. He was thin for every inch of him. His dark hair, mussed by the wind, paled his face. Behind his glasses his eyes were

equally dark. They looked politely at Walt. In them was part of the expression held by the woman in the car.

These two, Walt thought, as he put forth his hand and introduced himself, have been through a bad time.

The man said, "I'm Paul Beecham. I've—I've bought the *Herald*."

"Well, of course!" Walt said heartily. "Martha Evans told me you'd be along. Didn't expect you so soon."

Poppy muttered, "Some different from Sly."

Walt said quickly, "Martha said she'd found a room for you—temporarily at least." He glanced at his watch. "I have a train to catch, but Martha's office is just a block down around the corner."

Paul Beecham put his hand out again. "Thank you. Would you have time to meet my wife?"

Walt found himself shaking his head. "I'll have to save that pleasure till later," he apologized. "Trains and tides, you know." His words sounded vacuous to him. He picked up the city paper, tossed a nickel on the counter, bumped into Sara's pretty daughter on the way out, and hurried up the street toward the railway station.

Once there he had fifteen minutes to read his paper before the train was due. He didn't see much of it. He was busy trying to see inside himself, to figure out why Walt Arrington, usually so clear-cut and friendly, had put off the moment when he would stand before Paul Beecham's wife, would look straight into her eyes, and watch her mouth say, "How do you do."

"DOC" BERT'S WIFE, JENNY YOUNG, TOLD THE GIRLS IN THE DRUGSTORE ABOUT A BEAUTIFUL CHERRY-WOOD CHEST SHE DISCOVERED IN FARMER LAYTON'S BARN. MRS. YOUNG IS ONE OF OUR LOCAL AUTHORITIES ON ANTIQUES. [BULLETIN TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

## 5

Jenny Young lay under the bubble bath as she lay under the beach sun in the summertime, giving herself to it completely. Things like sun and water and silk against her skin warmed her and took some of the itch from the core of nervousness in the middle of her.

Sally yelled, "Mother, where are you?"

Jenny jumped. The soap bubbles bounced upward to her creamed face. "Always yelling," she whispered. Then she yelled herself. "Taking a bath. What do you want?"

Sally's voice was quieter and closer, against the door. "I can't find any socks."

Jenny frowned. "Ask Gram," she cried. "Or go barefoot. Who cares?"

Sally called gladly, "Okay, I'll go barefoot."

Jenny listened to the child's receding shuffle. They always like bare feet when they got plenty of shoes, she thought. It's when you've never felt shoes. . . . She reached over the side of the tub and snagged a cigarette from the pack on the floor. She lit a kitchen match with one long, sharp fingernail. Her hand trembled a little.

Kids, she thought. Always kids. Always wanting something,

just like men. Only different things. It was enough to have Jerry when I was very young and didn't care. But this Sally!

She looked back the seven years of Sally's life, and the nervousness rode her until she got out of the tub, rinsed herself under the shower, and rubbed herself vigorously dry.

She leaned toward the mirror. You could just see, just barely see, the fine lines beginning to radiate from the corners of her eyes. The crow black of her hair was so alive that only she knew it had to be touched up, added to, high-lighted, ever since Sally was born. She pulled back her lips in a grimace and carefully examined her big square white teeth. Kids take all the calcium, she thought petulantly, and all the life out of your skin and hair, and what do you get for it? Just confusion and great stomping feet and why and where and gimme.

Gram's timid knock rapped against the door. "Jenny," she called softly.

Jenny swung the door open, pulling her robe around her. "What is this?" she cried. "Grand Central Station?"

She avoided Gram's eyes. Gram was the mildest, yet the one who made her feel funny inside. It helped not to look directly into the old eyes.

Gram's thin face shriveled. There was apology in her faded voice. "It's just that Blake's downstairs and he's after the bottles in the bar again—"

"That fool," Jenny cried contemptuously. She looped the sash of the robe and ran quickly down the stairs.

Blake stood beside the old cobbler's bench cleverly fixed over into a bar. There was a glass in his hand.

"What do you think you're doing—in the middle of the morning?" Jenny stormed. She ran to him and snatched the glass from his limp hand, meaning to slam it down to the floor. Then she noted it was one of her good ones and set it gently on the table.

Blake looked silly in the room that was so perfect. He was beginning to look silly almost anywhere, Jenny told herself. Her



glance ran critically around the room, noting the high gloss on the lovely antiques, the dozens of figurines purchased at such expense and searching, and for a moment she felt calm again.

Only for a moment, because Blake reached out to her. His hand caught against the robe, pushed it aside and fitted over her bare shoulder. Jenny yanked it away, straightened, and slapped him across the cheek.

Impersonally she stood there, watching his face redden, watching his eyes redden too. Even his coarse blond hair seemed the color of anger. There was something about the sudden flush, the clear imprint of her hand, that stirred her. Something, too, in the waiting, where anything could happen.

Nothing did, though. The red faded, slowly, almost visibly, and Blake stood before her, white and known.

"Ptah." Jenny made an ugly sound of contempt and turned from him. She walked back up the wide, curving stairs to her room. When she came down again, fully dressed, Blake was gone.

The sun was bright against her face; against her soft, green hand-knitted dress. She stepped out smartly, aware of the click of her heels on the old pavements, the stretch of her leg muscles, the lift of her breasts, and the tilt of her chin. Some of her nervousness, her born anger, melted in the sun and in the pure beauty and rhythm of herself, Jenny, wife of Bert Young, Marshville's most popular doctor.

Marshville's most spineless man, she thought contemptuously. Seconded only by his cousin Blake. She tried to think back to the time when Blake had first appealed to her, when his kisses had pleased and warmed her. It was as if those hours had never been. Oh, she remembered the science it took to keep the affair hidden. That had been half the thrill, for a while, and then it got too easy. There was no fun in pulling the wool over the eyes of a dope like Bert. He never looked up from his tubes and pills long enough to check her faithfulness. He took so damned much for granted.

A place in her throat began to throb and swell. She wanted, suddenly and not for the first time, to pound her fists against something hard, to slam her head against cold stone. She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs—right here, right now, on Main Street in Marshville, at ten-thirty in the morning.

Walt Arrington, across the street, flipped a hand to her in greeting. He was in a hurry, but he called, "Good morning, lovely one."

That helped. Jenny swung her head to watch his retreating back. How would it be with him? He had a way of making you feel you were special, as if he had discovered gold by walking across the room to you. That Margaret couldn't know much, fading and quiet and damned near blind.

The throbbing came back, added to this time by her feeling for Margaret Arrington. Where did she get off living in a place like the Pillars, having people come from the city to her parties, everybody kowtowing and protecting her like she was porcelain? Her, with her plain dressmaker frocks, her white hair, her skin like a rotten lemon. How come she rated a man like Walt, whose vigor reached out to you and made you feel all the things you wanted to, and never did with a guy like Blake, a guy like Bert?

Of course, Bert had seemed mighty wonderful once. When she was a black-haired girl standing beside the railroad tracks, a bucket of lunch for her old man in her hand, watching the train go by. Her bare toes curled in the country dust, hungry for movement, hungry for shoes like the catalogue showed, high-heeled, curved daintily at the arch, brightly colored and bowed.

It had seemed wonderful, too, in a strange way, as if it were meant to be, when her old man got his leg cut off. Sure, sure, she should have felt bad. Everybody told her so. But you can't feel too bad about a drunk who works when he can't get out of it, when he needs liquor, and gets himself so stewed he falls under a switch engine. It's hard to suffer over a man who killed your mother every way but really, who gives you a dirty gray

shack, an unsheeted couch, a slab of a table, and scraps of food, to call your home.

For a terrifying moment she was back there, standing in the dark odorous room, her feet tight against the splintery floor, her back tight against the rough wall. She was scared and she was waiting, too, and Joe, the no-good next-door farmer, was coming at her again.

"Aw, sugar," he was saying, his voice full of plea, his arms and his body crying with force.

For a moment, too, the sound of her own voice was shrill in her ears. "You get out," she screamed. "I'll kill you, you dirty louse, I'll kill you."

But when his hands touched her the fight slipped away, and a trembling, a delight, rose in her. That was the exact time when they knocked on the door and said her old man had had an accident. That was when she got her first ride in a car, over to the county hospital. It was a new car. Even now the feel of the soft plushy upholstery on her backside, against her hands, came back to her. What with the car, with tearing herself away from Joe, with the country she'd never seen, she hadn't thought about the old man until they walked her into the ward.

He looked white, the way he did just before he went to work, when he hadn't had a drink for as long as he could possibly manage. He grinned at her. The old man was never mean, not even when he was soggy with gin.

"See what I went and done," he murmured. "Shoulda stood in bed."

Jenny was aware of the men, two long rows of them, with nothing else to do except get well, or die, or look at her. They were staring all right, and unconsciously she pulled herself tall, knowing that even in the faded flour-sack dress she had a lot to offer. She felt a misery that her feet were bare and dusty, but she knew the browned calves of her legs were sweetly curved and vanished slowly into the hem of her skirt.

She bent over the old man and fastened a kiss upon his cheek, lingering, warm, feeling the men watching her, feeling her loose

dark hair swing against her cheeks, against the old man's face.

His eyes were surprised when she met them briefly, straightening up again. "You look like your Maw today," he whispered. Then he pulled his lids down, and his lips looked blue around the edges.

Jenny swallowed hard to push down the abrupt fear. He wasn't much, God knows, but he was all she had of a person to go to, to be with. He didn't give much, but he didn't ask anything either.

She was aware of the hand on her arm almost before she felt its slight pressure. She looked at it a moment, noting its cleanliness, the square nails. She put her own hands behind her and turned to face the doctor.

A funny thought came to her, looking at him there for the first time. Clean eyes, she thought, eyes as clean as his hands. Nowhere in her life had there been a gaze like this, serene and gentle and giving. The fear started to go out of her almost at once, and she knew a wild desire to put herself behind her, hidden somewhere, as she had secreted her scrubby hands.

Now, this warm day that was adding heat to itself like an oven without a thermostat, so many years later, remembering Bert's face, his eyes, his slender build, it didn't surprise Jenny to see him step out of the drugstore. She watched him, walking slowly so that maybe she'd miss him. It didn't do any good to see Bert, anyhow. Him and his jalopy he treasured like an old hat. Him and his patients in all the dirty gray shacks around the countryside.

"Ain't he wonderful and grand?" her mind mimicked them. "Maw wouldna lasted the night hadn't it been for Doc Bert." And the town ones. "How did you ever manage to land such a gem, Jenny?" Bert this. Bert that.

It looked like he wasn't going to move. He was turned toward her now, and half a block away he looked little and thin and stooped. Not as big as he'd seemed to her that day in the hospital. Not at all as big.

DR. BERT YOUNG REMINDS MOTHERS OF SCHOOL-  
AGE CHILDREN THAT HE WILL GIVE FREE SMALLPOX  
VACCINATIONS ON MONDAYS AND WEDNESDAYS OF  
THE NEXT TWO WEEKS IN HIS OFFICE. [BULLETIN  
TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

## 6

Bert watched her coming, the slight twitch of her neat hips, the catlike pace of her feet. Anybody, even now, he thought, could see that she had learned to walk without shoes.

He rubbed his hand over his forehead and smoothed back his thinning gray hair. He took a long, deep breath. For once it had no rim of pain around the edges of it. He pulled thoroughly on his cigarette, dropped it, mashed it with his foot, and thought how nice rain would be, one of those long, long rains, unhurried and rhythmic.

Once he and Jenny, he remembered suddenly, back when they were first married and after a month's drought, had heard the rain in the middle of a sleepless night. They had looked at each other, grinned, pulled off their sweat-soaked night clothes, and raced out into the thick-treed secret backyard. They had danced in that rain, and run in it, and rolled like puppies in the tall, sweet-scented, heavenly wet grass.

Jenny was close to him now. Three little parallel lines drew her eyebrows together. Her mouth was tight at the corners, and he could feel it ready to open, ready to say something aimed to hurt or humiliate him.

He forestalled it. "The clan is beginning to gather. You'd better get in there and protect your interests."

She smoothed out her face then, her mind shuffling from him

to the women. Every morning at ten-thirty, he thought wryly, all of them in the dimness of the drugstore, groomed for a party, sitting on the little wire-backed chairs, at the old round ice-cream tables, lifting their faces once in a while to grab some of the stale air pushed around and around by the rotary fan in the ceiling. How George Smith stands it, there in the prescription booth, day after day!

But he loves it, Bert told himself, smiling a little. Chubby George Smith knew more gossip, more news, than the *Marshville Herald* ever could get at, and he published it as regularly.

"I need some money," Jenny said almost absently, her gaze slipping past him to the entrance of the drugstore, the clatter of female voices.

She asks me that automatically, he thought, adding a dollar here, a dollar there, to her hidden fortune, like a dog hiding bones when he isn't hungry.

He reached into his pocket and handed her a crumpled bill. That, too, is automatic. Her hand, reaching for it, was thin and sharp with crimson nails. For a moment he remembered other hands, scrubby and plump with youth.

"You be home for dinner?" she asked.

"As if you care," Bert answered shortly, pushed by something he usually had under control.

When her father died after the accident, he was thinking, it was different. He took her to Gram, the old lady who had found two orphan boys and raised them and helped to educate them. Jenny had stood in the middle of Gram's living room. She had walked slowly to the old piano, the worn chairs, and touched them. She had turned to Gram, seeing that bed, so wide and so smooth, with its white sheets.

"I can sleep here?" she had asked, her green eyes wide with hope, and defensive against hurt. "I can stay here?"

Bert's heart felt mushy with tenderness. Gram was younger then, brisk and quick and little—and so kind. She had moved to Jenny and put her arms tight around her.

She had said, "Honey, you can live here forever, for all of me. And I'll do my honest level best to make you happy."

Bert shook his head, clearing away the past. Gram had kept her promise all right. There wasn't a thing she had that she didn't share with Jenny, and nothing was too much to do for the girl. And look at her now, Bert thought wearily, working like a horse, twisted with arthritis, shunned by Jenny, made to feel a burden and a bother.

"She's no relation," Jenny had cried over and over. "What's the matter with the old ladies' home? Always underfoot—"

With a woman like Jenny it does no good to explain about loyalty. He gave up trying.

This time his long breath did have pain in it. He stood very still, quieting himself.

"I care whether you come, all right," Jenny answered. "It's always a help when I know when to expect you." The taunt was in her eyes, in every curve of her.

"Blake won't be much good to you," Bert said deliberately. "I've already bedded him down."

She shrugged. "Blake," she said with contempt. She turned toward the drugstore.

Bert could see her pull her learning, her false culture, around her like a cloak. He could feel her mind clear itself, alert and ready for battle. He knew that her tongue, caught momentarily between her lips, was being sharpened, like a hunting knife, to strip the skin from her opponents.

She's learned a lot, he thought tiredly. Gram has taught her, and I have, and the women of the town. She's a sponge that soaks up knowledge. Like water. But the liquid doesn't make her grow. It's just there for her to use, when she needs it, squeezing it out drop by drop to make the impression she wants to.

Was it always like that? he wondered vaguely, trying to go back to that time in the rain. But he couldn't find his way. There was too much between him and those days. Too much suffering, his own and other people's, too many words spewed from Jenny's

wide mouth and wiped away again by her passion. He couldn't find how it had been then with them, just as he couldn't discover in the fog of weariness that dimmed so much of his days the eager, strong young doctor who was never tired.

So she's through with Blake now. He watched her trim green back, her fine shoulders, disappear into the store. She's prowling again. His cousin's face, young and innocent once more in sleep, came clear to him. Blake.

He turned toward his old car. Before God, he thought, I'm going to kill her someday.

He opened the car door and slung his bag onto the worn seat. He watched, not actually seeing it, a shabby gray roadster pull away from the curb in front of the paper store. He slid under the wheel and for a long moment bent his head down against it, letting the pain have its way. After a time he took a small brown bottle from his pocket and tucked a white pill beneath his tongue.

If she doesn't kill me first, he thought sardonically. Then he started the motor and began his round of house calls.



MR. PAUL BEECHAM, THE NEW EDITOR OF THE "MARSHVILLE HERALD," REQUESTS THAT IN CASE YOU HAVE NEWS ITEMS AND THE PAPER IS CLOSED, WILL YOU DROP THEM OFF AT THE RESIDENCE OF MRS. LANE, WHERE THE EDITOR AND HIS WIFE ARE RESIDING UNTIL THEY FIND A PLACE OF THEIR OWN. [BULLETIN TACKED IN THE WINDOW OF THE PAPER STORE]

## 7

Always afterward, Anne Beecham was to remember her first morning in Marshville. Nothing happened. Nothing big. It was as if she were slowly attuned to an atmosphere, as if delicate antennae stretched their fuzz, trembling in the air of the place, picking up vibrations.

She woke early to the sounds of voices and lay still for a moment, letting herself become acclimated, while the sun laid a broad, beneficent finger on the foot of the bed. Then she rolled over and a sudden sickness shook her to find Paul's body so close.

How strange that it should seem indecent, as if she were bedded with an unknown man. At home twin beds gave them a semblance of privacy these months, even of dignity. But in Mrs. Lane's house there had been only this one room waiting for them, this one wide feather bed.

Her muscles ached, and she knew that during the night she had subconsciously held herself aloof from her husband. It seemed revolting somehow, physical contact, when they were so untouching every other way. Paul's face was turned toward her, simple and uncomplicated in sleep. His breath was quiet

and smooth. One hand, palm upward, extended toward her in a sort of silent pleading. She couldn't bear to watch it, so she set her mind instead on the woman who owned the house.

Mrs. Lane was short and chubby, with a compact heaviness. Her eyes were large, pale blue, and bulged out from her face. Her hair was iron gray, carefully coifed. Her hand was clammy to Anne's as she greeted them at the door.

Her voice whined a little. "It's so good to have you," she said, and her smile had a whine in it, too. "Poor lone woman that I am, it will be dandy to have company around." She looked at Anne carefully. Her smile never wavered, but her eyes withdrew. "Your room is ready, even though we didn't know when to expect you." It was a reproof. "Walt Arrington told me you were coming, he has a finger in everything, Walt has. You can take your dinners with me, though where I'll get the energy, I'm not a well woman, you know—" She put a hand on her large bosom. "So many troubles, so many many trials—"

Paul stemmed the tide. "We're very tired," he said, his nice voice canceling his abruptness. "Do you suppose we could go to our room now?"

Mrs. Lane liked men, you could see that. She warmed her eyes this time. "Why, bless your heart," she cried, "of course. There's hot water in the tank for a bath. My, it will be good to have a man to do for again. I'll probably spoil you both."

Somehow Anne doubted that. She couldn't imagine this woman spoiling anybody, except herself.

She asked, "You're—you're a widow, Mrs. Lane?"

The smile went away completely, puckered into a thin, tight circle. "I have a husband," she said harshly. "He lives in a big old mansion over Hemert way. Very rich farmer he is. And what do I get? Fifty dollars a month, I get."

Anne was sorry she had started it. She clicked her tongue sympathetically against her lips and looked suggestively up the old staircase. In the noonday sun there were medallions of dust on every step. But their room, when they reached it, was comfort-

able enough, and the bathtub, in which Anne soaked herself even before unpacking, was clean.

Paul called through the door, "I think I'll take a walk around the town. I'd like to see the paper. Want to come?"

Anne shook her head. "No, thanks. I have a little headache. I think I'll sleep awhile."

The house was very quiet. The sun, subdued through the faded green blinds, the old windows that reached to the floor, seemed far away. The feather bed was a mother's arms, holding her restfully and softly. She deliberately pushed all thoughts away from her, made her mind a black velvet curtain, wrote the one word *sleep* on it in silver letters, and let herself be swallowed into the deepness.

When she woke there was no tint of sun through the blinds. Paul stood before the old dresser, bending a little so that the mirror could catch his hands, working at his tie. He was whistling, very softly.

Such a long while since I've heard him whistle, Anne thought. There was a time when she knew he was coming long before his footsteps told her, a time when they were courting and she held her breath between the hours they were together. Mornings then, and early evenings like this, his whistle would be a lariat tossed forward to her, to tie her in gladness and promise to him.

She stirred and he straightened. There was a keen excitement in his eyes. "It's a beautiful little town, Anne," he cried. "Everything is old and weathered. The paper, too. I got the keys. I tried everything—even the linotype—"

Even then, that first evening, knowing Paul and watching his face, warm with hope, Anne realized that her husband had found the place where his roots needed to grow. She knew somehow, that if she were to stick to her decision to stay with him, to give time the chance it was supposed to deserve, she would have to find her own place here.

Paul came toward her. "You'll like it, too," he said enthu-

siastically. "I know you will. The women look very nice—" He stopped abruptly.

Anne swallowed the words he expected.

He grinned ruefully. "Nice, I mean. Substantial and settled, yet interesting."

You would notice them, she found her mind saying. You would see them and size them up and probably you always have. Only I never realized it before. The old thought, the unbidden one, came again. How do I know the redhead was the first? She's only the one he was caught with.

As if Paul sensed what she was thinking, he sighed, his eyes still on her. Then he bent toward her. "Anne," he murmured. "Oh, Anne." He put his hand on her hair and slowly he laid his lips against hers, alive with tenderness.

Anne tried hard to move her own a little, to relax her body. Instead, as if her mouth belonged to someone else, it grew tight and hard, unresponsive and chilled.

Paul pulled away. He touched her cheek gently with one finger. He said, "Mrs. Lane serves dinner at six promptly."

This first morning, lying beside Paul, Anne realized that her thoughts had brought her full circle again. Back to herself, her pain, and her problem. It was like a record, worn and old and scratching in the same rut. Somewhere she had read that was the way people turned crazy. They thought the same things over and over again, and each time the needle of the thought dug a little deeper into the curlings of their brains, until they couldn't lift it out into other, more normal ruts.

She pulled herself from the bed and dressed hurriedly, ashamedly, as if she were clothing herself in public, although Paul's eyes remained closed and his breathing didn't change. Then she walked to the window to investigate the voices.

Catty-cornered in back of Mrs. Lane's house was a series of small gray shacks. Bent double, heads huddled, four Negro men mingled voices as chocolate as their skins, in words Anne had never heard.

"Gitup you bitchy seven. Damn yawl. Stand up and bark."

Fascinated, she leaned her head out of the window, watching the burliest of them pull back his arm, and the white dice, the white teeth, flash in the sun. Has it gone on all night, she wondered, or do they always shoot crap before breakfast? She found herself wondering what sort of section this was, these shanties separated only by dusty alleys from houses as old and proper as Mrs. Lane's.

She watched for a long time. It was as restful as the feather bed had been, lifting her thoughts from their channeled circle. A tall, slim colored girl, head wrapped in a red cotton kerchief, came out the back door of the shack, letting it slam behind her. She stood, quiet and graceful, over the men. Once in a while she stretched, her throat taut and young, her chin tilted toward the morning sun.

She's beautiful, Anne thought. They all are.

The game broke up after a while. Three of the men walked down the road in front of the house, scuffling up dust behind them. The fourth, the biggest, reached for the girl. She came to him so solemnly, so gladly, that Anne turned away from the window.

It was still only seven, and Paul's position was unchanged. Anne avoided looking at him, her mind filled with the girl's morning gladness of surrender. She opened the door almost stealthily, shut it as gently, and tiptoed down the stairs and out of the house.

The porch was broad, shady, and cool. For a little she sat in the swing, her childhood rising up in her. When she turned restless, she went down the path, opened the gate, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Marshville in the morning was something to see. Trees linked branches over the street, mingling their shades of green, from lime to yellow to deep off-purple, making puddled shadows on the old pavement. The houses were all in need of paint according to city standards, weathered by the wind and the rain and

the sun. Almost all of them sat directly on the brick sidewalk. There was that contrast she had noted from her room. A high old house, evidently sheltering solid white citizens, flanked by a leaning ancient shack, uncurtained, unpainted, chickens scratching around it, and brown children running in the deep, narrow back yards.

Only the colored part of Marshville seemed to care about greeting the day. The Negroes moved up and down the streets in that rhythm peculiarly their own, calling to each other, loaded with baskets of freshly ironed clothes or a shouldered rake. The men looked the other way, shyly. But the women spoke to Anne, even across the street.

"Mornin', ma'am."

"Good day, ain't it, missus?"

"You up early, ma'am."

There was no self-consciousness in their greeting, and no strangeness. It was as if they had seen her, strolling like this, every morning of her life, as if they had known her as a girl.

Anne returned their greetings, and a feeling of warmth began to grow in her. It was a long time since she had walked alone. Stepping out so, she became conscious of herself as a person now, as the sum of the years that had been. She felt the present as she hadn't known it for a long time. Each step was taken by itself and revealed something new to her eyes, as if she walked with a very small child who stopped to point at flowers, at a bent blade of grass, at a laden ant, or at the pale blue shell of the sky. Everything was new, everything fresh.

There was a mail truck in front of the neat post office, incongruous and bustling in this place of unhurry. There were cartons piled high, marked with national labels, before the unopened door of the grocery store. The Deluxe Hotel looked frowsy and asleep. The narrow door of the paper store was open. But even before she reached it, the odor of freshly roasted peanuts from the old red machine in front brought quick saliva to her mouth. She stood watching the creaking workings of the equipment.

When she looked up, her eyes met those in a lined, tired face topped by curly gray hair.

"Smells good even early, don't it?" the old man asked. He said, "I'm Poppy. You got a hankering for some?"

Anne smiled. "I think I'll go stark raving mad if I don't eat them right away."

He smiled back. "Five minutes. You be patient that long?"

She nodded, leaned against the doorsill, facing out, and let the aroma tease her. Across the street, set between the movie house and the corner, a great white house faced her.

"That's the Pillars," Poppy volunteered, following her glance. "Arringtons live there. Quality people."

Anne asked, "Why do they call you Poppy?" His face seemed aged in kindness.

"Hereabouts," he went on in his slow way, "grandfathers and grandmothers get to be called Poppy and Mommy." He reached into the machine. It stopped itself with a reluctant rumble. He scooped up the pale tan nuts, and let them slide in a small stream into a striped paper bag.

"I haven't seen bags like that since I was a kid," Anne remarked.

He smiled. "I've had 'em since you were." He set the bag in her eager hand and shook his head when she started to open her purse. "Homecoming gift," he said.

The peanuts were hot, filled with an extra flavor compounded of the morning and her mood. After a while Anne sauntered away. She crossed the street and stood before the iron fence, her breath caught. For the width of the great lot and the depth of it, thick green shrubs formed a maze as perfect as an architect's sketch. From the back of the yard the tender scent of lilies of the valley, violets, and honeysuckle added themselves to the unnameable scent of the hedges themselves.

The side door of the house opened. An enormous colored woman, crisp in a white dress and green apron, pushed a broom energetically before her on the wide porch. She looked up as

if Anne's gaze had touched her. She flipped a fat and friendly hand, put down her broom, and moved with great deliberation down the side path toward the fence.

Anne bent quickly and guiltily scrambled up the peanut shells. She put them in the empty bag and held it behind her.

The woman said, "Mornin', ma'am." Then, after a pause, "I'm Miz Arrington's Sara."

It was a matter of pride to her, Anne could tell.

"You new here, or just passin' through?" Her eyes were large, soft, and knowing.

Anne suddenly found herself wanting very much to win Sara's approval.

"I'm here—to stay," she answered slowly. Homecoming gift, she heard in Poppy's soft voice. Homecoming.

Sara didn't answer her for a long moment. Then she nodded and it was like the peanuts, an acceptance and a welcome. "You want you should come see our boxwood?" she offered, reaching for the gate, unlatching it, swinging it wide.

Anne took a step back. "Oh, I couldn't. Without an invitation—"

Sara drew herself tall. "I'm invitin' you. People I invites comes in."

There was no choice. Anne walked through the gate.

"You start here," Sara smiled. "If you get lost just whistle. I'll come find you."

She started back up the path. "Whistle soft, though," she added over her broad shoulder. "Don't know this early my lady got misery or not." She ambled across the porch and disappeared inside the house.

Anne looked ahead of her. The tall hedges, high as her head, extended in a straight lane. Without standing on tiptoe she couldn't see over them. She was suddenly in a green world, a world she had known somewhere when she was young. She walked slowly, her footsteps lost on the soft turf, and tried to place that time. She turned a corner and came to a dead end.



Pleased somehow, she retraced a few steps, took a left turn, and found another lane stretching long.

It was the daisy field, she recalled. Across the street from the city flat, before they put the new high school up, there had been those acres of daisies. It was quite possible to lose yourself in them. It was wonderful to lie flat on your back and see a square of sky framed in white petals. It was exciting to deck yourself with daisies linked together into fabulous necklaces, bracelets, and crowns.

The long lane stopped, three short ones puzzled her, and then again the long stretch. She turned another corner. Coming toward her, pipe in mouth, white shirt open at the throat, eyes down, was a man.

Anne found herself ducking around the corner. Her heart started to pound and a sort of adolescent guilt gripped her. She ran, bumping time and again into the dead ends of the maze. Finally, hopelessly lost, she stood still, getting her breath.

She could imagine what the man would think of her.

Eight o'clock in the morning, invading someone's private property, someone evidently the big shot of Marshville. She stood still, waiting to be caught, feeling the complete interloper.

Nothing happened. The birds spoke quietly near her. A butterfly did a barrel roll close to her face. But the man did not come into her alley. After a while she moved forward again, determined to get out without being seen.

It took only one turn and she found, opening out toward her, a widespread garden—the mingled floral scents she had noted from the street become visual. Great trees, centuries old, towered above the house and formed a lacy network through which the sun pushed its way to lie in patterns on the soft grass. Comfortable chairs, small iron tables, and two lounges were scattered about.

Anne looked toward the house, trying to see beyond the line of arrogant hollyhocks to the path. As she started toward it, the back door opened and Sara emerged. In her hand there was a

tray, even from a distance sending out its pennant of promise. She lifted her head just long enough to flash Anne a smile and set her eyes again on her careful feet, maneuvering the steps, crossing the grass.

Now what? Anne thought frantically. That man is going to eat his breakfast out here and I'll be caught—

Sara, close enough now for her whisper to carry, said, "I brought you a little something, ma'am." She set the tray on one of the small tables, and pulled a chair close. "You just set down and refresh yourself." Like a magician she whipped away the heavy white linen napkin.

Anne forgot her predicament. The tray was silver. On it sat a tall glass of orange juice, satiny with frost, a pot of coffee puffing at its spout, and a dish of rolls with strawberry jam.

"I can't," she protested weakly. All these months she hadn't been able to eat. And now, this morning in Marshville, any kind of food was a temptation beyond resisting.

"It's what my lady would want," Sara insisted with a rare dignity. "Only she's got one of them demon headaches so she can't make you feel at home herself."

Filled with the faraway vagueness of a dream, Anne found herself sitting down, smiling, nodding, lifting that glass of chilled juice to her lips, and trying to be ladylike against the sudden heroic pressure of her appetite.

Sara said, "I got to get about my cleaning now. You just take your time. Don't bother about the dishes. I'll come get them later." She looked proud and happy, as if she had started her day right.

Anne said, "Thank you so much, Sara. No wonder you're famous around here."

The pride swelled visibly. Sara lowered her eyes modestly, but the glance she shot Anne from under her lids was full of the promise of friendship.

Anne watched her go. She poured the coffee into the thin cup. She buttered one of the rolls, watching the fluffy whiteness ab-

sorb the thick jam. She ate slowly, making it last. Peace went through her like sunshine, untying one small knot after another, melting its way through clotted spots, leaving her body and her mind free, flowing and her own. There was so much sun in her, so much greenness, so much sense of coming home at last. So much, even, of peanuts and rolls, orange juice and coffee and jam. By dint of great courage she managed to leave half a roll on her plate. She covered the tray again and leaned back, letting her head fall against the chair so that her face was tilted to the sky. It was a very different sky from the one of yesterday, the one of the trip down here. Clear, bright, and interested, there was nothing but hope in its sharp blue.

So it was that Walt Arrington, after finishing his breakfast, donned his jacket, kissed his wife, and moved to the window to pull the draperies a little closer. He glanced carelessly toward the garden and was stopped by the planes of Anne's relaxed face, the free fall of her hair over the back of the chair, and the child-like exhaustion of her tall slim body.

It didn't seem strange to see her there, not strange at all, having seen her many times in his mind since the morning before. He hurried a little then. He kissed Margaret once more, very gently, so as not to move her cheek a painful inch. He ran down the wide, carpeted stairs, snatched his hat from the marble-topped hall table, and opened the great front door.

He was too late. The girl was crossing the street, very slowly. She was looking at a tall thin man, standing before the paper store with Jenny Young. It was Paul Beecham, the new *Herald* editor.

Walt swung abruptly back into the house. He nearly bumped into Sara. "Forgot my brief case," he muttered. He went into his study and sat down, waiting quietly until the three across the street would be gone.

The face which Walt Arrington had just seen filled with such peace—Anne Beecham's face—tensed into a cold expressionless

mask as she crossed the street toward her husband and the black-haired woman. The stiff set of her shoulders, moments ago so relaxed under the warm morning sun, seemed to ask, "Is there no limit to this, no end, no change?"

"Anne," Paul said haltingly, taking her arm, "I was looking for you. Anne, this is Jenny Young, wife of Marshville's doctor. Mrs. Young, my wife."

Anne was so wrapped in her own necessity of keeping her face quiet, her eyes calm, that it was a moment before the impact, the quality of the woman, reached her. When it did, she felt as if she had inadvertently touched the cold rippling skin of a snake. Crossing the street toward them, she had known with a sick certainty that those moments of peace in the Arringtons' garden were premature. Now she wondered when she would be able even to watch Paul in the simple normal attitude of politeness toward a woman, without visioning his arms reaching toward that woman, enfolding her eagerly.

It was ridiculous on the face of it. Paul was no monster. He was simply a man who had known an infatuation. It didn't seem fair that all the years of his hard work, his devotion, his companionship, should go down the drain because of one slip. It didn't seem fair, but that's the way it was.

Jenny Young said, "A very charming husband you have, Mrs. Beecham. A welcome addition to Marshville. Men don't count for much here, most of them." The way she smiled at Paul, her eyes glowing, her hair shining, her teeth white in the sun, lumped in Anne's stomach, so that she regretted the hot rolls, the coffee.

"I like him," she found herself saying gaily. It was a false voice, but listening to it, she found that it had its points. "He's a sweet old thing, and marvelously brilliant."

She could feel Paul's eyes on her in surprise, as if beside him, garbed in the skin of his wife, were a complete stranger. "Now girls," he protested, "you'll turn my head."

"Good," Jenny cried. "That's exactly what I want to do." She lifted her hand in a salute, turned around and walked away from them, flamboyantly, as colorful and obvious as an advertising billboard.

"Nice," Anne quoted. "Substantial, settled, yet interesting."

Paul grinned down at her, for a moment his old self. "I hadn't met that one yet," he explained.

Anne found the false tone had attached itself. "Let me warn you, my pet," she cried, "she'll have your scalp if you don't watch out."

Paul put his arm around her waist. "Jealous?" he teased.

Then the enormity came back to them both. They moved apart and stood stiffly, staring up and down the street, which was beginning to bustle, becoming suddenly shabby and not at all peaceful.

Anne stared across at the big house. "No," she said slowly, all coyness gone. "Never. It's less than that—" She shook her head.

How can you explain it to a man?—that it doesn't, at times like this and with a woman like that, have anything at all to do with whether you trust him; or with whether he would get Jenny on the side porch of a country club and sneak a little senseless kiss. It's just that there's no bearing the thought that a woman like that thinks your husband is susceptible. It—it's between the two women, really, and the man has nothing to do with it. It's as if she said, and, by heaven, Jenny Young would be the one to say it, "See, he's aware of other curves besides yours. See, he likes the way my mouth lifts toward him. He likes the feeling of my arms, the smoothness of my flesh. See—you're a nothing. He could get the same bounce from any of us. What's so special about you?"

Paul murmured, "Please, Anne."

She stared at him blankly. "It's a wonder they marry at all."

"Who?"

"Men and women," she went on. "They're so different."

Paul savored the moment. It was a small door, a tiny trap door, but it was open a little, even if the slot of light revealed only many larger heavier doors.

He made his voice casual. "As the French say, darling, '*Vive le difference.*'" He took her hand and looped it under his arm. "I've been looking for you. Thought maybe we could find a restaurant and get us breakfast. I'm starved."

Anne freed her hand as inconspicuously as possible. "I've had breakfast and I still have some unpacking. You run along. I'll see you later."

She was back in the shuttered room at Mrs. Lane's, laying their clothes neatly side by side in a drawer of the ancient bureau, before she wondered why she hadn't told Paul of her experience in the boxwood maze. She had finished her job and read two chapters of a book before she understood. It was because she was building a new life, one of her own, like learning to walk, experiences in which Paul didn't register. Didn't figure at all.

## EDITORIAL

With this issue the *Marshville Herald* comes back to what we hope will be life, under the amateur control of your new editor, Paul Beecham. Let's get this straight in the first place. What we know about putting out a paper can be placed in one of Poppy's peanut shells—with room to spare. What we intend to learn extends for years and miles, we hope.

We can't do it alone. We can't even learn without your help, your criticisms, your patience, and your understanding. We're asking for it, fellow citizens, and we hope you'll give it to us. Which sums up all we have to say.

One of you has already helped us, though, even if he prefers to remain anonymous. So for our initial editorial we give you the following:

"You walk down the street and you look to the right of you and the left. You see the way the trees plume..." [*Marshville Herald*, June 5]

## 8

The thing that Paul liked most about the *Marshville Herald* was that the moment he walked through the old hand-hinged door, he was back in the past, anywhere from yesterday to two hundred years ago. It was an anachronism that delighted him; the fact that he was combing the town for all the small items that were happening and were about to happen at the same time he was living with the events that had happened, that were, like the people in the cemetery outside town, dead and gone and hardly ever remembered.

It took him a week to clean the place up. The previous owner, who had died setting page four of the April 24 issue, had not been a neat man. The old roll-top desk was full of the litter of bills unpaid, of ideas unborn, of names scratched on scraps of paper, aimless kites without tails of identification. The floor of the small office was thick with dust and debris. The windows, grimed with the grease that comes from nowhere and everywhere

with time, successfully shut out the sun and the curious glances of passers-by. Paul saved their cleaning till last, enjoying in a strange way the privacy they afforded him.

In contrast, the dark back room, with the ancient wheezing linotype machine dominating the scene, as a ponderous and great actor dominates a stage, was surprisingly tidy. It held a well-oiled smell, which turned itself into reality when Paul pushed down the buttons and the foreign combination of letters sprang into being. Like a woman who has maintained her efficiency and appearance with the aid of lubricating creams and lotions, Zachariah, as Paul in a moment of whimsy named the thing, had seen its best days, but was geared still for a good long haul.

"If you'd like to," he told Anne those first days, "you could lend a hand. There's a lot of sorting to be done and a load of scrubbing."

Anne looked up, said, "It sounds like fun," and Paul hadn't been sure whether she meant it or not. But she did come along with him. Under her hands the front office assumed a spick-and-span air, and though she spent most of her time going through the files, reading out fragments of old news to him, it was good to have her there.

They were not alone very much though. The town was curious and the town dropped in. A young man came first. He was tall and slim and unfinished at wrists and ankles, and his voice promised the eventuality of permanent depth, although at the moment it was uncertain.

Paul greeted him heartily. This was a lad he recognized, as he had known himself.

"I'm Jerry Young," the boy said. "Wondered if you had some sort of job for me." He waved his hands awkwardly to include any sort of occupation.

Paul said, "Sit down, sit down. What do you want to do?"

It was a close and private thing Paul could tell. "I want to write," the boy said. "Mother thinks it's silly. Dad doesn't think



about it at all; he thinks I ought to go to college. But gee, if I wait all those years—”

Paul interrupted. “There’s nothing wrong with college.”

“Except that I’d flunk out,” Jerry said bitterly. “I damned near didn’t get through high school.” He looked up at Paul intently, his honest eyes miserable. “I’m dumb.”

Even as he shook his head in negation, Paul thought of Jenny Young. It didn’t take long in Marshville to find out about her. Leave a boy alone enough, be selfish enough, spend all your time trying to deny that you’re old enough to have a son this age, and he’s sure to think some odd thing of himself.

“Smart enough to push a broom?” Paul asked.

Jerry grinned. “If that’s the way to start, I am.”

Paul lifted himself from the swivel chair, went into the back room, and returned with the push broom he’d bought that morn- ing at the grocery store. Jerry took it.

“I’ll work for nothing,” he offered.

Paul studied him. This was a gift the boy wanted to give. He allowed him to. “Tell you what we’ll do. Any ideas you get, anything you want to put into words and toss off your chest, you do it. Let’s say we give you your salary in news space for a while.”

It’s amazing, Paul thought, how a kid can pick up dignity, a forgotten garment on a dirty floor, and wrap it around himself so it looks like a swaggering cape.

It was raining, slanting and hard, the day his next visitor pushed open the door and leaned against it. He was a medium sort of person, thin only in the hollows of his cheeks; blond hair going to inconspicuous gray; eyes pale blue, the whites ribbed with red lines; nose straight enough, but pulped a little at the tip, with a matching web of red that extended up the sides of his cheekbones.

He looked just past the left of Paul’s head. His voice, after he had swallowed twice, came rich and warm, though hesitant. “I’m Blake Marcus,” he managed at last, as if that explained a great deal, “Doctor Young’s cousin.”

Paul swirled around in his chair and signaled to the straight kitchen chair at the other side of the desk. "Sit down," he offered. "I hope you're an advertiser. If we're ever going to get this paper rolling, we're going to have to get some ads." He smiled. The man smiled back, his worn face slowly warming.

"I can't stay," he said, taking one step into the room. "I just wanted to—welcome you. Once I thought I'd buy this paper. Once." He looked around the room and peered toward the dark shop as if it held a secret he shared and loved.

Paul asked, embarrassed by the hangdog tone, "You know something about newspapers?"

Blake straightened for the first time. "Used to be police reporter on the New York dailies. Two of them. Never wrote a story without a by-line for five years straight." He thought that over. "Papers everywhere wired me again and again. They wanted me to work for 'em." He looked directly at Paul. "Honest," he added.

"I believe you," Paul said. "Why didn't you go?"

Blake sat down then. "Papers come out day after day," he said conversationally. It was as if he were talking about somebody else. "An editor has to depend on his reporters. Can't go looking for them in every joint in town, wring them out, get them going again. Just can't. Don't blame them."

Nothing in Paul's life, his protected, studious youth, his years of teaching, had prepared him for this sort of thing. It was a little like the redhead, too real and demanding, so he hedged.

"Anything I can do for you?"

Blake got up restlessly. His hands shook, and he had that look of waiting which comes with sweating out the first drink of the day, trying to make it eleven instead of ten o'clock, noon instead of eleven, one instead of twelve, until finally a decent proportion of time has crawled by, and the initial swallow can be inconspicuously downed. He shook his head.

"Day like this gets on my nerves," he admitted. "Just let me

drop in sometimes. I need the smell—" He slung a gesture toward the back room.

Paul said, surprising himself a little, "You know, I'm trying to do this all alone. You pick up items for me, I can give you space rates." Now he'll stalk out, all injured feelings.

But Blake didn't stalk. He stopped his pacing on a dime. He turned his face to Paul, and it was the same as with Jerry. It runs in the family, Paul thought, men with inferiority complexes.

Blake cried, "Sold." He did walk out then.

Paul told Anne about it that night.

"The *Lame Duck Herald*," Anne laughed. She had a new laugh, a new lightness, that Paul thought sat poorly on her face. "Since when have you been fascinated by the underdog?"

Paul looked at her. Occasionally, during these busy days of organizing his paper, of tramping the streets, getting acquainted with everybody, asking for the fragments of news that were to add up to an edition, Anne's attitude jarred on him.

"You don't take the whole project very seriously, do you?" he asked quietly. "It's our complete and total savings, you know. I'd better make good."

Her voice was quiet in reply. "You will, of course. But it occurs to me that instead of spreading what money we have on people like this Blake—and Jerry—you might do well to get one good reporter. From the city, perhaps."

Paul nodded. "Probably. But Blake was a good reporter."

"And maybe he can be again," Anne said brightly. "More power to you, lamb pie," she added.

She patted his head and he thought, "Good little boy, go play with your toys."

But there was little time for bitterness, as there were too few hours in the day. Slowly the people of Marshville came into focus in Paul's eyes. He worked out a schedule by which day by day he hit the same stores, the same people, at identical hours. He learned to talk about crops and church parties, new babies and local politics.

When they asked him about the paper, he grinned and said, "Soon, soon."

The third man of the Young family came to see Paul late one night. He tapped on the door and Paul, absorbed in his first editorial, looked up frowning.

"Hi, Bert," he said, identifying the doctor. "Come in, come in."

Bert shut the door behind him. "Thought maybe you had a pot of coffee on that old burner out back. Sly always did this time of night."

Paul stood up. "As a matter of fact," he acknowledged, "I was just about to make some."

When he returned, after waiting for the coffee to come to a boil on the old oil stove, he found Bert leaning on his strong finger tips, reading the unfinished editorial. A strange shyness assailed Paul. He pulled a couple of ten-cent cups from the bottom drawer. When Bert volunteered no opinion, he knew that he had to ask for it.

"Well, what do you think?"

Bert sat down, somehow managing to make the straight chair look like bed for a weary man. He sighed.

"A touch of William Allen White with embroidery by Hodd- ing Carter and hidden in the corners a forget-me-not whimsy of Charles Lamb." Bert sniffed. "Coffee smells good. Sly used to make wonderful coffee."

Paul glanced at his watch. He knew now how some of his journalism pupils felt when the caustic side of his tongue lashed out at them. "I feel," he said slowly, twisting his mouth into a perverted smile, "as if you had slapped my small son across the face."

Bert grinned and looked straight at him. "Sly's editorials stank to high heaven," he said. "Grammar was beyond him. But they were his own sons, blood own. Got to give him that."

"And mine isn't?"

Bert shook his head. He took the cups from Paul's hand and vanished to the back room, to reappear almost immediately, a

wreath of rising steam added to each cup. He handed Paul one and sat down again. He sipped at the coffee, as if it pleased him beyond measure.

"You make better brew than Sly," he complimented.

Paul nodded mockingly. "Thank you."

Bert glanced at him sharply. "You mind criticism? Going to have a rugged time in this town if you do."

Paul said, "I'm not abnormal about it."

Bert grinned. "Good. Can't have three thousand people locked up in a small town and not get a certain amount of criticism, ranging from friendly to crucifixion. They dish it out. They take it. They know everything that's happened to everybody. And funny thing"—he reached into his pocket and brought out a long thin cigar—"nobody seems to hold it against anybody."

Paul watched the good hands hold the cigar loosely, light it. He studied the mouth, pulling firm around the end. How few men he'd known, really. How few friends he'd had.

"No," the doctor went on, "in the long run nobody holds it. Even the worst grudges. Unless it's an outlander. Then they can take offense at a fly on the newcomer's nose."

Paul laughed shortly. He went for the coffeepot, brought it back, refilled the cups. "Go on," he invited.

Bert was enjoying himself. "Nothing's too good for Marshville's own. Take one woman. Take one man. Playboy, no doubt about it. There's a kid around town, fourth in a good family, that gets to look more like him every day. Everybody says so. Everybody says, 'Spittin' image of his paw, ain't he?' Nobody minds. They just got enough tact not to say it to his mother."

Paul asked, "Have I met this playboy?"

Bert shook his head, "Not unless you've made a trip to hell lately."

I've made it, Paul thought, in passing. In passing only. Somehow with Bert there, with the quiet night newspaper all around him, hell seemed farther away than it had for some time, and things looked as if they might work out.

"Dead, eh?"

"And gone." Bert grinned in sanctimonious mockery. "Day of his funeral, folks went to see him laid out at home, clucked with his wife. Big house, everything elegant. Then they went around the corner with flowers and bottles to console the woman."

Paul studied the picture. He chuckled.

"More to it," Bert went on. "No use going into it. Mighty fine woman."

Paul played with his coffee. "We like it here. Maybe in time we won't be outlanders. And thanks for the warning." He reached for the editorial, tore it in half, in quarters, and tossed it into the basket at his feet.

He said, "I don't want to go sloppy. But I do appreciate your being here, taking the time."

"What I really came for"—Bert talked as if thinking to himself, slow and diffident—"was to thank you."

"Me?"

"For my cousin."

Paul saw the similarity then. Add shyness and uncertainty to Bert and you got Blake. Add tautness and hopefulness and subtract the years and you got Jerry. Bert was in the middle, the finished portrait, the rounded, the fit, knocked out neither by self nor by youth.

"He hasn't been around since that one day," Paul said. "I thought he'd decided against the whole idea."

Bert shook his head. He reached into his coat pocket and sorted out the prescription pads, scraps of paper, cards and pill packets, until he came to a small, neatly folded sheaf. He handed it to Paul.

"He asked me to stop in with these," he explained. "Said tomorrow was the deadline for the first edition."

Paul nodded and unfolded the papers. He began to read, at first vaguely conscious of Bert pouring another cup of coffee, re-lighting the long cigar, then lost, gradually and surely, in the phrasing of the longhand before him.

"You walk down the street," it read, "and you look to the right of you and the left. You see the way the trees plume—"

When he had finished he drew a long breath. He glanced at the other slips, crisply written social notes, club meetings, full of names, places, dates—straight reporting, neat and clean.

He smoothed out the editorial. "I see what you mean," he said slowly, like a stubborn child on whom the light has at last dawned. "Did you read this?"

Bert nodded. There was a somberness on him, so that Paul saw how he might look on his way home after losing a patient, or when he knew that there was no use fighting any more. "On my own hook," he admitted.

"No wonder you—"

Bert asked, "Could you run it?"

"Front page—by-line—" Paul agreed.

Bert shook his head vehemently. "No by-line. Blake said, 'Give it to him. See if he'll use it. But if he does, Bert, don't let anybody know I wrote it. If they knew they wouldn't like a word of it.'"

"Of course they would. A piece like this—"

Bert stood up. "Look," he said patiently, "they don't hold it against him. No. They may say he's a no-good drunken loafer, but they give him the time of day all the same. But that doesn't mean they want to take him seriously, does it? They stopped thinking Blake was capable of anything much quite a while ago."

"But he's got them all—he loves them all. Every sentence tells them—"

Bert laughed. "Who wants a lush to love 'em?" he asked sharply. He turned toward the door. "No, let them believe it's the way you, the outlander, picture them. It'll get you in—"

Paul rose, too. He walked, towering above the other man, and held the door open.

"Two o'clock," Bert commented, his eyes reaching to the steeple clock in the Presbyterian Church. "Better get going. Hard day tomorrow."

Paul lifted one hand, dropped it slowly, watching him go. He wanted to hurry home to Anne. He wanted to tell her all about it. He locked the door and walked very slowly down the sleepy echoing streets.

There wasn't much to tell, really. A little gossip. A fine piece of writing. The way a tired doctor drank coffee. For the space of a block he thought of the man, then a sort of hopelessness came over him, a childish kind of fear.

What he actually wanted to say to Anne was that he was afraid he had chosen exactly the wrong thing in which to invest their savings, that he was still the awkward young professor who knew a great deal more about books than he did about people, that he couldn't even write a decent editorial that was all his own, as the deceased Sly's had been, as Blake's was.

Maybe, he thought, nobody holds anything against anybody in Marshville. But it was hard on the families. Bert could talk about Blake in the middle of the night, with no trimmings. He never got around to mentioning his son.

Or his wife, Paul thought.

But then, I never mention mine. He turned into Mrs. Lane's path. There was no waiting light in the entire house.



| Question: What do the "gals"  
| talk about during their regular  
| daily sessions at the drugstore?  
| Bet you could give us an earful,  
| eh, George? ["Playful Prattle,"  
| *Marshville Herald*, July 10]

## 9

George Smith stood in the doorway of the drugstore. Mornings like this it was fun to watch them come. Some days they were like cut flowers putting themselves together into a bunch. Other times they looked more like a gathering of vultures, their beaks poking ahead of them and their mean wings beating the air.

He was impatient for them today. 'Course he rightly shouldn't spread anything from a telegram. But if he worked it right it'd never get traced back to him. Fine thing it was when they decided to have wires come through the drugstore. Kept him right up to the minute, that it did.

He watched Janie Norton climb onto her bicycle outside the store, the telegram tucked unopened into her slacks pocket. He'd tried. He'd said, "Better open it, Janie. Might be an answer." He could hardly wait to see her face as she read out the words.

But Janie fooled him, as she did just about everybody, with a shake of her head and silence. She was a pretty woman, no doubt about it, if she'd curl her hair a little, or use that new shade of lipstick come in yesterday—Passion's Tool, wasn't it? And something happened there back in the city. It added up now, George thought through his disappointment. All that gossip had a good fire behind it for certain. Her getting a job as a commercial artist no less, according to her Ma, then flying home like a wounded bird, reading till all hours in the night in the back

room of their big old house, playing those concert things till all Sleigh Street rang with them, and never saying aye, yes, or no to the people of the town she'd known all her life.

Miz Maude was the first he saw heading toward the store. He sighed and turned back. If the rest of them didn't get here soon he'd be batted sky high by that voice and he'd have to watch the words fall all over each other pushing their way out. That woman was born with a swallowed dictionary in her.

She was inside and the door slammed behind her. "Did you ever see the like, George," she cried. "That Janie Norton near run me down. Jerry Young's working for the *Herald* editor, know that? Wouldn't you think Anne Beecham would begin to mingle a little? Her and her long walks and reading up the library. Mrs. Lane says they're terribly quiet and hardly eat anything, though how anybody can relish Mrs. Lane's cooking is beyond me. Why, I remember when we first came here—let's see, was it thirty-two or thirty-three years ago—goodness, how time flies—she invited us out to the farm—manor she called it, can you imagine—"

The door flipped open and shut. Miz Maude switched her face toward it. The Southern Belles drifted in. Their soiled silk frocks were high afternoon fashion a decade gone. Their cheeks sported round spots of rouge and no two curls were in place. They swirled themselves to the nearest chairs, seeming to twitter, although Miz Maude gave them no chance to do so.

"Oh, girls," she cried, "George and I were just saying—"

"You were just sayin'," George mumbled. He went behind the fountain. He always cleaned the fountain up at ten-thirty. Back in the prescription department you could hardly catch a word.

The Belles cried, in unison, "Look, there's Margaret Arrington. S'pose she's comin' in?"

Margaret walked slowly to the door, peered into the dimness, smiled, waved a hand and moved, erect and brisk, past the window.

"Not her," Miz Maude said. "Beneath her dignity."

"Why, Miz Maude," Sue Lee cried, "what a thing to say!"

"What a thing to say!" Sally Mae echoed.

Three other women, their voices mingled but not blended, wandered in, settled themselves, and ordered Cokes with a twist of lemon.

Funny, George thought, squirting out the thick brown sirup, adding the clear fizzing water, stirring and serving, there's a dozen of them maybe, and only three or four of them count. The rest are sponges or sounding boards. Eager, too. How they scrabble for a little tidbit to add. Like kids trying to get better grades so they can be promoted.

Jenny Young sauntered through the door. She made it look as if it were by accident, quite a feat, George decided, considering nothing but sudden death would keep her away.

"Ah," Miz Maude cried, "here she is. Meeting can now come to order."

The sponges laughed gaily.

Jenny's eyes were like the chipped ice George was pouring into the Cokes. "Everybody knows you're a card, Maude," she said. "A regular card."

Silence dropped like a pile of feathers through the air. Eagerness filled it, too. Jenny and Maude were always good for some excitement.

George decided this was a fine moment to mention it, now, while everybody's attention was focused on one subject.

"Most forgot," he said casually. "Telegram come for Janie Norton 'bout twenty minutes ago."

Miz Maude cried, "That's why she looked so funny. Near run me down on my way—"

"Well," Jenny interrupted, "did she open it—"

"Here?" Miz Maude asked in a rare moment of discernment. "It'd be like undressing in front of the Episcopal Church."

George whistled softly and stared at the ceiling. They'd get around to him eventually, and he had found a way to say it. Right

smart way, too. Without actually quoting, without any slander either, by golly.

Jenny sort of spoiled it though. She said in her laziest voice, "Okay, Georgie, give with it before you bust something vital."

He glared at her. Making out like a lady in her clothes, her car, and them fine things in her house, talking down her nose whenever she was a mind to. No matter how Bert tried to pretend, Jenny was no lady, and if it weren't for Bert she'd sure get her comeuppance. Like that time he'd seen her in the city with Blake, crossing the lobby of a hotel, no less. He'd never mentioned it to a soul. Except he kidded Blake kind of sly about it, and of course he'd let the girls know he'd seen something that would shock them if he wanted to tell. Or maybe it wouldn't. Jenny got away with a lot because she often told on herself first. That way you didn't know what to believe.

He ignored her now. He could afford to. Everybody's curiosity was whetted sharp.

Miz Maude said, "You might just as well out with it, George. Jenny's right for once. You look like a balloon just waiting to bust."

The sponges laughed nervously.

George opened his mouth and Sara's Hennery opened the door. He tipped his hat to the assembled women and shuffled meekly to the back counter. George sighed and went toward him.

Hennery took a long time to pick out a package of gum and a detective magazine. Hennery couldn't read a word, but his oldest grandson was in the sixth grade. He and Hennery had high old times playing hooky back of the Arringtons' garage.

George glanced over Hennery's head and saw their attention slipping. They'd be on to something else in a moment. Build it up good, he thought disgustedly, and something else always happens.

It was Bess Marr's dirty little Joanne this time. She stuck her messy head in the door, saw the women, opened her mouth and eyes wide, and backed out.

Miz Maude said, "Disgraceful. Honestly, why we tolerate such a woman—and her child—"

Jenny asked sweetly, "You afraid your William gives Bess his trade, Maude?"

The laughter was shrill and quick and breathless this time. And for once, Miz Maude was without words.

Outside the little girl, Joanne Marr, stubbed the toe of her sandal against an uneven brick and fell sharply. She sat back, her eyes filling slowly with tears which streaked clean paths down her soiled cheeks. She watched the blood, thick and bright, well up in a bubble over the scrape on her knee. It made her feel sick in her stomach, so she closed her eyes. She opened them to the touch of a hand on her shoulder. The new lady, Mrs. Beecham, was kneeling beside her.

"Does it hurt badly?" she asked.

Joanne stared at her. Sally Young was right. She looked like the princess in the Snow White book. She shook her head. "I hurt myself worse," she bragged. "Lotsa time."

Mrs. Beecham took a handkerchief from her purse and swabbed gently at the blood. "Let's go into the drugstore," she suggested. "We can fix it up right."

Joanne said, "No. Not in there."

"Then let me help you home."

Joanne shook her head, hard this time. "Mama says get out, I get."

Across the street a window above them was raised creakingly. A voice called, "Joanne, get me some cigarettes." A coin spun through the air and landed on the curb.

"Yes, Mama," Joanne said.

Anne Beecham lifted her head and stared at the window. A thin white face glared suspiciously down at her.

"What you sittin' there for?" the face asked Joanne.

"I hurt myself. Miz Beecham's fixing it."

Anne called, "She scraped her knee."

Bess Marr said, "Oh." She hesitated. "Well, thanks," she added ungraciously. "Get them cigarettes, kid, and make it snappy." The window clanked down again.

Anne helped the child to her feet. Her arms felt thin. "Well, Joanne," she said, rising to her own feet, gathering up her purse, "you'll wash that scrape, won't you?"

Joanne nodded, limping toward the paper store. She turned, part way there. "Thank you." She hesitated. "You better not go in the drugstore till they've went. They don't like people, those ladies." She disappeared into Poppy's doorway.

Anne watched her go. She'd invited Mrs. Lane to walk to the drugstore with her.

"Not me," Mrs. Lane declared decisively. "I wouldn't walk in there this time of day for anything. Let them shred me if they want to, but by golly I won't know about it, and I won't strain myself trying to get back at them."

"I still need some shampoo," Anne had said, and here she was. She swung around abruptly and walked through the door before she could change her mind.

The drugstore man was talking. He said, "All right, you asked for it, girls, and don't say I'm reading off no telegrams. It's just"—he stopped, as if to bring forth a strong political point—"that Janie Norton—"

"Near run me down," the flyaway-haired woman cried.

"Who's tellin' this?" the drugstore man asked with dignity.

"You," the women chorused.

"It's just that Janie Norton," he repeated solidly. Then his eyes lighted on Anne and he shut his mouth with a snap.

Anne walked past them, and it was as if she wiped sound away with her progress, an eraser against a board. She wandered over to the shelves, staring blindly up at the bottles and boxes, hearing at first nothing but the hum of the fan, then the slow pickup, whisper strength, which gathered impetus until it swirled around the place.

George stood next to her. "Help you, Mrs. Beecham?"

Anne pointed out her purchases, answered his phrases about the weather, about how she liked the town, about how the *Herald* was coming along. She could feel his waiting through his politeness, could feel the concentrated waiting of all of them, impatient for the outsider to depart, so that they could get back to the revelation about one Janie Norton.

She turned at last to go, and wished suddenly that she were past them all. Seated closest to her, one lovely knee crossed over the other, shoe dangling, was the black-haired woman she had met that first morning, the morning she crossed the street from the Pillars and stood beside Paul.

The eyes, then as now, sized her up coldly and completely.

"Good morning," Jenny Young said, and it was strange that such a simple greeting could sound both insolent and indifferent.

Anne nodded. "Good morning," she answered, and found the false gaiety there, sounding a little more natural now that it had been used a bit.

Miz Maude looked up at her. "Remember me, Mrs. Beecham? Mrs. Lane introduced you to me second night you were here."

Anne smiled at her. "I remember."

Miz Maude swung out her arm. "Sally Mae, Sue Lee, Emma, Doris, Phoebe—"

Anne nodded solemnly at each of them, trying not to shift her glance toward Jenny, whose calculated stare was tangible against the side of her face. When it was done, she said, not giving Miz Maude a chance to signal George to bring another Coke, "It's nice meeting you all. See you again sometime."

She turned around and walked through the door quickly. She could feel the eyes between her shoulder blades.

Outside, the woman who almost bumped into her was white-haired and wore a perfect white linen dress. "I beg your pardon," she said in a clear, light voice. "I didn't see you."

"I came out rather suddenly," Anne smiled.

The woman switched her head toward the drugstore. "I see,"

she said slowly. "You're a brave woman to come out at all, before the rest of them." She put out a hand. "I'm Margaret Arrington, my dear."

"Anne Beecham." The moment in the green maze came suddenly to Anne's mind.

Margaret leaned toward her intently. "Of course," she said. "I'm sorry I haven't called. I have headaches."

"I really hadn't expected anyone to call, situated as we are."

Margaret smiled broadly, aging her face ten years. "I'm going to enjoy you," she said happily. "You're nice to look at."

As if a bell had rung, the door of the drugstore opened and the chattering group of women walked out, a sudden splash of talk on the quiet of the Four Corners. Anne looked at her watch.

"A quarter of twelve," Margaret Arrington whispered in her ear.

Anne nodded. "Exactly."

It was then that she thought of the child with the scraped knee, the small girl who had warned her against those women. She thought, too, of Mrs. Lane's remark, "It's safe to go any time from noon on."

All of them, even Jenny Young, clustered around Margaret, inquired in tender tones about her headaches, and made small feminine plays for her attention. Anne stood quietly, listening to it all, removed and yet somehow part of it. Margaret Arrington, she told herself, is a brave woman, too. Braver than I, by far. I would have joined them, had they asked me. I will the next time.

Margaret slung a careless arm through Anne's. She asked, "Do you like to walk?"

Anne said, "Love it."

Margaret nodded, as if she had known what the answer would be. "Then come along," she invited. "We'll take a good brisk stroll and work up an appetite for one of Sara's best lunches."

Anne smiled at her, smiled at them all.

When she saw the amazed expression on Jenny Young's face,



Anne knew that the moment of her acceptance had arrived. She was in. These women would follow Margaret Arrington's example. They would try to be friends. Jenny Young, she'd bet a dollar, had never been invited so casually to lunch at the Pillars.

My friends, yes, she thought, walking down the street toward the big house. But Jenny Young, Miz Maude, even the ones whose faces blurred together and whose names she would never get straight, would be only too willing to crucify her, the outlander, the stranger, just as they had been about to crucify the woman of the telegram.

If they can find my weak spot, Anne thought, my Achilles' heel. And she made a resolution. From all of them, as from Paul, false gaiety was as good a protection as any steel.

Martha Evans announces a new list of books has arrived at the Marshville Library. These include five novels, two autobiographies, three nonfiction selections, and one thin book of assorted poetry. [*Marshville Herald*, August 7]

## 10

The Marshville Library was a partitioned-off portion of the firehouse. Nights when the boys met to play poker around the wide plank set up on two wooden horses beside the old fire engine, it was a little hard for Martha Evans to hear herself think.

Martha ran the library two evenings a week, Tuesdays and Fridays, seven till nine. During the day she managed her real-estate office. She had a competitor, but he was from Pennsylvania and didn't do much business, although he had some good properties. Almost anybody who wanted anything went to Martha. They had known her father, they knew her mother, and they wanted to help the girl.

Help her they did, and Martha would be the first to admit it. Without the rentals, the occasional sales of land, the very rare turnover of Marshville houses, Martha and her mother and the fourteen-room wooden barn in which they lived wouldn't last very long.

Martha did a good job with the library, as she did with everything she touched. A tall, thin girl, "past the first flush," as Marshville was wont to say, she put all of herself into any project. And the library was her love. It did something simple and real to her to be able to stock it with books she had read herself, to prove every time she recommended one that she had read it, that she understood it, that she could talk intelligently about it.

Walt Arrington was the head of the library board. Walt was a sort of dream man in Martha's life. There was Ed, of course. Ed she had met when she went to the university for two years, the two years before her father died.

Ed was short and broad and even his glasses seemed thick and fat. He had a pulpy mouth and he wore clothes that always seemed too tight for him, but he was faithful. He showed up every week end, rain or shine, and if the boxes of candy were cheap, they were also colorful.

"I'm born to be an old maid," Martha had been known to say frankly. "I have the looks for it, the attitude, even the inclination." If she hoped someone would contradict her, except Ed, she was able to hide her disappointment. Nobody ever did.

Nobody ever knew much about Martha anyhow, which was an accomplishment in a place like Marshville. Her quick, friendly eyes smiled behind their glasses, she kept the big house shining and took care of her constantly sick and constantly whining mother, and nobody knew how she felt about it. Nobody cared much, really.

On a rainy night in early August Martha unlocked the door to the library, pulled the string on the center light, stood for a minute sniffing the smell of age, of cheap leather, of shiny paper jackets. She pulled out the files, took a newly sharpened pencil from her purse, and sat down to wait for customers.

Walt Arrington came first, as she had hoped he would. He shrugged the water from his coat, shook it off his hat, and smiled at her.

"Well, we need it, Marty," he said. Nobody else called her Marty. "How's your mother? How's business?"

Martha smiled wryly. "They're both ailing, thank you," she answered.

He came toward the desk and sat down, stretching his legs, propping his feet on their heels. He looked directly at her. "And how are you?"

Martha shook her head. "You can't possibly care, Walt." She

smiled. "That's what's so wonderful about you. You make it sound as if it mattered."

Walt grinned. "It does matter. People always matter. Friends especially. We are friends, you know."

Martha fiddled with the filing cards. "I know."

The rain drummed on the old roof. Despite the brilliance of the center light there was grayness in the long narrow room. It muffled itself into silence and black in the far corners, the highest shelves. Somewhere, in the firehouse or the back of the library, a rat scuttled between the old walls, his feet scratching an uneven rhythm, like an old pen on manuscript paper.

Walt rubbed his forehead. It was a mood that came with rain, this one, as if some of the wetness seeped into his normally ebullient nature and sizzled against the steady flame that usually lit his spirit.

Martha noticed it. "You're tired. You work too hard. Too many things. Head of the vestry. The school board. The library board. The chamber of commerce."

"A very large frog in a very small puddle," Walt said.

The door opened and they began to stream in. It always surprised Walt how many people there were in Marshville. He was familiar with all their faces and a great many of their lives, black and white. But one at a time. Given a parade, a Fourth of July picnic, a good movie everybody wanted to see, it was strange how they added up. Like now. Old man Peabody, you wouldn't believe that he could even read. Pauline's ten-year-old, the Haskell twins—they surged in, squishing water, leaving blurred prints of their interest on the already damp floor.

Walt watched them, smiled at them, spoke to them. After a while the common folk seemed to weed themselves out and the elite began to come. They pulled up chairs and lit cigarettes and pushed back their bright raincoats. It was like the drugstore all over again, and suddenly Walt had no stomach for it. He walked to the back of the room and fumbled through the worn covers labeled M. A little Christopher Morley maybe.

The hand on his shoulder was fine-boned and friendly. Bert asked, "How goes it?"

Walt turned to the worn face. "Is there any medical proof that rainy weather dampens the spirits?"

Bert said, "Don't be a fool, bud. Thank the good Lord your spirits get a lift from such a small thing as sunshine."

"Trouble?"

Bert shrugged. "No more than usual. Three of those Johnson kids died finally."

"From the fire?"

"From the fire." Bert knotted his hand, spread it wide, locked it again. "Those filthy shacks, miles from anywhere, and the damned fire department playing poker. And no hospital closer than Fairmount."

Walt said, "We took up quite a collection for Zeke and his wife."

"Hell of a lot of good it will do them. Three kids. Three. Gone just like that. And Zeke will never be able to use his hands again—"

"I'll find something for him," Walt promised.

They stood silent, listening not to the rain nor the shriller spatter of voices, hearing instead Zeke's animal cry of pain as he raged into the burning shack after his babies.

Bert allowed himself a deep breath at last. "Thought some reading might do the trick." He went beyond Walt, picked up a shabby volume as if its place were as well-known as his toothbrush's, nodded briefly, and walked out.

Jenny called after him, "See you in church, Bert."

The women laughed.

Walt rested his head for a moment against the old leather. A phrase from a song came to him. "The heart bowed down by weight of woe." He grinned to himself in the musty dimness and turned, his smile still huddled at the corners of his mouth, to face Anne Beecham.

His voice was a trained thing, betraying only what he wanted

it to. His smile deepened because he commanded it that way. His hand went out of its own accord, a gesture he knew was not correct.

"Mrs. Beecham," he said, "good evening."

Anne's hand went into his calmly, cool and dry, and moved away before he could test its texture. When she smiled her teeth were white and even, all except for a tiny gap, as if a baby tooth had come out and offered no replacement.

Walt swung his hand toward the shelves. "Could I help you?"

"I was looking for Angela Thirkell." Anne moved her head and some of the light above Martha's desk seemed to stretch toward them.

"You like her, too," Walt stated, reaching out an arm to pluck a practically new volume. "See, we're almost alone in it. The jacket isn't even worn."

Anne turned the book over slowly. "Imagine," she murmured. She looked up quickly. "I had lunch with your wife. I like her."

Walt smiled. "Do you? So do I."

Anne nodded. "She's been very kind to me. Very friendly."

Walt nodded this time. "She likes you, too."

"Thank you for the book."

"It's nothing. I'm sort of unofficial guide around here."

Anne tilted her head toward the group at the front of the room. "What about them?"

"They don't read," Walt laughed. "They ask for the latest best sellers, take them home, glance through them for shocking passages, and bring them back. Then they can say they've read them."

Anne looked thoughtful. "You're hard on them."

Walt said, "Not especially—I know them. They delight me. We're friends. But it's true they come here, as they do to the drugstore, mostly out of self-defense."

"You mean they're afraid to be the one who isn't here?"

"Right." Walt watched her mouth move. He didn't allow a thought to come close to him. He just watched.

"I have an idea," Anne said, "that you're right." She turned abruptly and walked with a quiet sort of grace away from him, growing brighter as the center light enclosed her. She stood calmly while Martha filled out her card, nodded to the assembled women, and pulling her camel's-hair coat collar close, she opened the door into the rainy night.

Walt thought, She isn't afraid to be the one who isn't here. He found his feet moving. He stepped around the desk as around an open culvert, the copy of Morley still in his hand. He didn't see Martha reach to stamp it, nor Jenny's sharp uplifted face, a look of speculation around the eyes. He didn't hear Martha say, "That interior decoration book Margaret wanted is in, Walt."

Nor Jenny's remark, "Hustling home, Walt, or just hustling after?"

The ripple of laughter got to him, though, dully, like the echo of his own footsteps.

Through the gleam of the wet night he could make out Anne ahead. She was walking slowly, her head tilted back a little, as if she liked the feeling of cool rain on her face. Even when he was close behind her, she didn't seem to notice.

He said, walking beside her at last, "Miserable night, isn't it?"

He watched her eyes pull slowly from some far place to focus on him, coolly, as if she hadn't seen him such a few moments before.

"I like it." She tucked her book tightly under her arm and pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat.

"I know," Walt nodded. "I could tell that, just watching your back."

"You could?"

He found the words coming out smoothly, probing words, the kind he usually avoided, not wanting to know too much, to get too involved. "I could tell that you were miles away from here, too. From Marshville."

"Oh, but I wasn't." She turned to him quickly, her face animated. "I was just across the street from Mrs. Lane's."

"You were?"

She hesitated, pulling back again.

"Whatever were you doing there?" he asked lightly, seeing the line of gray shacks in his mind.

They walked in silence for a minute, the question pacing beside them.

"The old man across the street is dying," she said slowly at last. "The one in the house with blinds like peeling scabs."

"Old Man Mertons," Walt added.

"I didn't know his name." She pulled at the knot of her scarf, looking straight ahead. "The doctor came. He was a long time inside the rusted screened porch—in the dark of the small house."

"We all have to go," Walt managed inanely. All of him was concentrated on the pale blur of her face, growing light, growing dark, as they walked along the quiet, shimmering street.

"So we do," she agreed lightly.

"Sorry," Walt said. "Please go on."

"Oh, there's nothing to go on about. It haunts me a little, that's all."

"Please," he repeated.

She continued, almost involuntarily. "The house next door, the house fastened to the peeling one, is empty except for an out-of-tune player piano somebody left behind. Every day a fat boy comes to play the piano. He plays 'Whispering' and a jangled tune I've never heard."

They were at the corner now, the corner before Mrs. Lane's house, halfway down the block. The light from the old-fashioned street lamp tinted the trees an odd purple, caught the four angles of the curb, blocked the square off, like a stage set, so that Walt saw the two of them clearly, dramatically, as if something big were about to happen.

Anne stood still, looking nowhere he could see.



"He plays them over and over. He doesn't seem to care that the old man is dying. He plays for hours."

She took a deep breath and stepped down off the curb. Walt followed her across the street, somehow on tiptoe, as if afraid to disturb, to upset, this flow of words.

"The old man is dying, to the rhythm of 'Whispering' on a player piano. And in the dark. There's never a light in the house."

Clear and sharp, the mood of that moment when he had bowed his head against the bookshelves, when the people had pressed too close, filled Walt.

Anne went on compulsively, "The fat boy peers from the door sometimes. He looks queer and lost, as if he might entice little girls into the dark with him." She shivered.

Walt reached over, and tucked her collar tight against her throat. His hand shook when he put it back to his side.

"But sometimes he shuts off the player piano. Then for a long time he tries and tries to play himself. It seems to be all there is for him—those hours with the old piano."

They had reached the gray narrow porch of Mrs. Lane's house. Anne straightened, looked around her, smiled a little. "You'll think I'm crazy."

Walt shook his head. "No."

"You—walked in on my thoughts, I guess." She turned toward the house. "Good night."

"Wait," he gestured.

She hesitated.

"Thank you."

Afterward it seemed to him that it was a seal, the way she didn't ask, "What for?" the way she didn't belittle his understanding with more apology.

He said, "It doesn't seem right. The old man should be allowed to die in quiet, with a little dignity." He stared across the street to the tiny house. "There can't be much dignity anyhow, in a house so small and peeling."

"Unless he has a special amount of it inside of him," Anne added. She moved away, across the porch, and the door shut softly behind her.

Walt stood still for a long moment, then he swung around and walked briskly back the way he had come. He was not aware that the tempo of the rain had picked up. He was not sure that it was raining at all. He let himself consider it, finally. He thought, What a strange and beautiful way to start a—a friendship.

He stopped in at the library where Martha, once more alone, stamped his card for him and gave him the book for Margaret. He watched her, smiling, not saying a word. She looked up at him finally. There was a certain flicker in her eyes behind their glasses.

"I've been wondering," she said. "Do you suppose the Beechams would like to rent the little white house on Sassafras?"

He saw the house in his mind, old, immaculate, set in a wreath of trees. "I think it would be just right, Marty. Why don't you ask them?"

"I will. I think I will." She handed him the books and patted his hand. "A steady diet of Mrs. Lane's might run them out of town."

He squeezed hers in return, moved by something he couldn't recognize. Her loyalty, perhaps, her unspoken understanding.

He strode out into the night again. For half a block Martha's expression stayed with him, a small itch of guilt. It has nothing to do with Margaret, he rationalized. I'd just as soon tell her every word we said.

But somehow he knew he wouldn't. The words that had come so strangely from Anne Beecham were his to keep. A searching below the surface relationship of these people. In this place, where everyone was open and known to him, there was an elation in just seeing them with new eyes and through a new mind.

He was at his own door before he let himself admit truly why he felt so elated. It was not just that tonight had given him

a communion he had wanted all his life, had missed without knowing it. The whole thing, he told himself, fitting his key into the lock, was as close and warm, as personal and giving, as if Anne Beecham had set her lips in love upon his own.

He carried a real feeling of guilt with him as he went upstairs.

Come one, come all! Tomorrow night is CARNIVAL NIGHT in Marshville! The Four Corners and one block each way will be roped off for the gala event. There will be rides and concessions and a hill-billy band. There will be dancing in the streets and cotton candy. [Marshville Herald, August 28]

## 11

It was the habit of Jenny and Bert Young to give a small dinner party each year before the carnival. Jenny kept it exclusive. Nothing but the best, she told herself wryly. But no matter how she ridiculed the idea, a certain excitement bubbled inside of her, and she started preparations a week in advance.

Bert used to say, "Maybe we ought to entertain oftener. It does a good thing to you." He watched her bustling around the big kitchen, giving Gram quick, efficient orders, watched her hands absorbed in the task of putting together the foreign dishes she had such a way with when she wanted to try.

Jenny pretended the recipes came out of the big thick book *Food of All Nations, Epicure's Delight*. And she refused to share these recipes with anyone. But as Gram knew, they were laboriously translated from a dirty little notebook, grayed by smudgy fingers, browned around the edges by time. That recipe book was the one thing Jenny had brought with her. The one real antique her mother had left her, given her by her mother before her.

As a child, Jenny, lying on the soiled couch in the little shack, with the old man off some unknown place, had tried to silence the gripings of hunger in her small stomach with the strange words. Some of them, like bread, like butter, like flour, she could

hear, if she remembered hard enough, spoken in her mother's weary voice. Others, she figured out for herself.

But no matter what the recipe, she saw a fat scrubbed woman somewhere in another land, with braids around her head, bustling from great, black wood stove to cool, hidden spring, saw the loaves piled high, the golden crusts, the browned roasts, the turkeys, the spaghettis, and thick spicy sauces. Saw them so clearly that the taste of them went down through the back of her eyes to her throat and up into her mouth to send sudden juices against the underside of her tongue.

It was a long time in the plenty of Bert's house before she could satisfy those juices whose demands kept her eating long after Gram and Bert. Once they were satisfied, however, her interest in the recipe book cooled. Her interest in all food cooled, to be replaced by the loving care of the body which must not add an inch to its curves, a pound to its soft delicious flesh.

But once a year she brought it out, and once a year Bert said, "Now we will bustle, and they'll come and say oh and ah, and your hostess reputation will be safe for another twelve months."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The table, set for eight, glittered with the high glow of old candlesticks, old silver, old china, and the great Lazy Susan that had belonged to Gram's mother. The odd exotic odors of Jenny's dinner sent a simmer of anticipation through the immaculate rooms. Jenny stood before the table, counting out the settings, and a rare anticipation rose in her, too.

A far cry, she thought, a far cry.

When the phone loosed its shrill demand she moved slowly to answer it.

Margaret Arrington said, "My roses are so lovely right now, Jenny. Would you like some for your table?"

Who wants your roses? Jenny thought. I can buy roses. I can set a table as good as you, and have a house that looks like a picture from a magazine. And I'm better than you for doing it. Because I ate off a board. Hear me? I ate off a board with my

fingers. And Maw died too soon to tell me about lifting up the little one, dainty and nice.

She laughed aloud. "Thanks," she said brusquely. "But the table's just right as it is."

Margaret said, "Oh."

Jenny waited for her to hang up. You didn't have to hit Margaret Arrington with a sledge hammer. She was so used to palaver that the gentlest little rebuff sent her skiting back into her proud shell.

But she didn't say good-by. Instead she asked, hesitantly, "Who all is coming, Jenny?"

Jenny said, "Same old eight. Miz Maude, William, you folks, Martha and that Eddie jerk, and us."

It always seemed funny that Miz Maude and William got invited everywhere. It was understandable about Martha. She and her mother didn't have any money left, of course, but the house they lived in had once been the showplace of the bay area, and in Marshville you took family into account. But Miz Maude and William, there was hardly a place they didn't show up, and Jenny had never been able to figure it. Except maybe that the pouring of Miz Maude's jabber got a party started, if only to drown her out.

"Why?" she asked abruptly.

Margaret cleared her throat. "I was thinking of the Beechams. I thought perhaps—"

The nerve of her, Jenny seethed. I don't tell her who to invite to her parties. She said, "Margaret, my table is set for eight people." She swallowed down the rest of the words.

"I see," Margaret said coolly. This time she did hang up.

Jenny rubbed one ear softly and turned from the phone. Bert was leaning in the doorway.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

Jenny kept it soft. "Margaret. She thought we ought to ask the Beechams."

Bert nodded. "That's what I stopped by to tell you. Saw

Paul Beecham downtown and I asked them to come along."

Jenny opened her mouth.

Bert forestalled her. "Better call Anne Beecham and second the invitation. It's a pretty late one, as it is. Should have been earlier." He turned and walked out of the room before Jenny could speak.

The reluctance, the anger, were still in her voice when Anne answered her call. "My husband," Jenny said, "and I, of course, would like to have you and Paul join our little dinner party to-night."

"My husband," Anne said lightly, "and I, of course, would be delighted. Thank you very much. It's kind of you to have us."

Jenny shrugged, hanging up the receiver. Kind, she thought. A lot of choice I had.

They strung out along the sidewalk. After stepping from the Youngs' porch, from the Youngs' dinner table, they sauntered, gay and noisy, toward the heart of Marshville.

The carnival reached out to them before they could see it. It reached out in a blaze of colored lights, and of music high and shrill and slightly off key. All around them the people of the village moved magnetically down the uneven streets, sucked toward the carousel, the gambling and Ferris wheels. Children dashed in and out among them, the hurry and excitement turning their voices to screams. The colored people walked sedately, as if they appreciated the fact that they were allowed to be part of this great assemblage. As for Jenny's dinner guests, they had declared a sort of truce upon the battle of their daily lives, a truce upon each other, and their laughter was an added bright thread in the noisy night.

When they reached the Four Corners they stepped into another world. Lanterns were strung mathematically for the advertised block each way, and the sidewalks were lined with booths. In the center of the street the merry-go-round pushed its horses

on a jolly circle to nowhere, and the Ferris wheel carried squealing people in small rockerless carriages, up and around and out over nothing and back again.

Miz Maude added her own particular squeal. "William," she commanded, "go buy cotton candy." William, the silent, nodded glumly and headed toward the stands.

Eddie cleared his thick throat. "Merry-go-round, Martha?"

Martha lifted an eyebrow, winked at Anne and said, "Sure, you bold adventurer you."

Paul said to Anne, "Dance?" but she shook her head.

Walt said, "Let's start here and make the rounds, shall we?"

Jenny stepped up beside him. "Let's go," she cried, and took his arm.

Bert reached for Margaret's hand. "Come along," he said, and he pushed through the crowds, slid a coin into the wicket of a booth, and led her, protesting, to the Ferris wheel and into the first swing that stopped. He pulled the bar across their laps and said, "There," with satisfaction.

The wheel was still for a moment. Margaret stretched her chin up to look at the night above them. Then the carriage began to rock, slowly, slowly, and she closed her eyes, feeling the gentle rhythm touch a nerve in the pit of her stomach.

"I can't stand these things, you know," she warned Bert.

"Nonsense," he laughed. "Up on top you can see for miles. Perspective, more ways than one. You'll love it."

"I was eight years old the last time I rode in one," she murmured, still with her eyes closed. "I disgraced myself the moment we landed. Right in front of everyone."

"That I should have seen. I bet you were a dignified little lady even at eight."

She shook her head. The up-pull began, and she felt the muscles in the back of her neck start to tighten.

Bert said, "I haven't seen you—officially that is—for quite a while, Margaret. You feel well?"

"Except for the headaches, yes."



"Look now!" Bert cried, joy sudden and rich in his voice. "Look now!"

She opened her eyes and turned them away from the sky, across the countryside, dark and sleeping, across the highway, down to Marshville, brilliant in its moment of celebration.

"How small it is," Bert murmured. "What an insignificant little square of lives it contains."

For a moment they hung outward over space, suspended above the mixed and moving huddle of ants below. Then the wheel shuddered, their carriage swung violently, and rocked to a stop.

Margaret clutched Bert's arm. "It's stuck," she cried, ashamed of the shrillness in her voice.

Bert patted her hand. "Nope, they're just loading. See?"

She looked down, and fear pricked at her like needles. "I can't see anything," she whispered. "Bert, it's just gray fog and I can't see a thing."

His hand moved to the back of her neck, and his fingers pushed and probed and smoothed it. The one word *psychosomatic* came to his mind. He had wondered for a long time. "When did they start, Margaret?" he asked gently. "When did you have your first headache?"

You would think, Margaret told herself, trying to swallow her fright, keeping her eyes shut against the gray fog she had glimpsed for a moment, that you would forget the first one because of all the others in between. But it was there, all right, too sharp for looking at.

She looked at it now, though. It was something to cover this moment, to give her time to regain control. She said, slowly, putting it into words for the first time, "It was after Nancy was born. Walt worked so hard, remember?" She moved her hands restlessly against the bar. "I sat with him a lot. He was finishing the plans for the first machine. I remember that. He was working on the final draft. It took a long time." She sighed. "A very long time."

Bert took his hand away from her neck. "Feel better?"

She nodded.

"Go on."

"I was eating an orange. Silly. And he turned to me suddenly. His face was so bright. He really seemed to see me again, after all those nights of work. He said, 'Come look, Sweetie.' And I hurried. I wanted to—" She stopped.

"Yes?"

She shrugged. "We're moving again. Do you mind if we get off as soon as we're down?"

"No," Bert agreed. "The orange?"

"This is silly, Bert," Margaret sounded like herself again. "It was very simple and unfortunate and not at all as tragic as it seemed to me at the time. I leaned over the drawing board and the orange dripped all over the paper. It squirted in queer, odd blotches—" She took a deep breath. "I can still see their patterns sometimes—" She stopped again.

"And you burst into tears and ran into your room and had the first of a series of crashing headaches?"

She waited a moment. "Yes," she admitted, the light tone gone from her voice.

Bert took her hand "That would be only natural, wouldn't it? Lots of headaches start from a good cry." He reached for the words. "You know, Margaret, it's a pretty well-established medical fact that we humans have a lot to do with giving ourselves all sorts of ailments—"

"You mean to say," Margaret asked breathlessly, "that I've deliberately brought all this pain on myself all these years?"

Bert sighed. It wasn't going to work. "Not deliberately. But when we are troubled—or feel guilty—or want to escape the consequences of something—"

The carriage stopped and Margaret stepped out. She did not look at him. Her shoulders were squared and her chin high. "That is utterly ridiculous," she said. "The specialist told me that there is a chronic condition—"

"It's hard to explain." Bert took her arm, following her lead

away from the Ferris wheel, "and I may very well be wrong. It's a physical thing too, now. It could be. You see—"

She loosened her arm. "That's just it, I don't. And I refuse to believe that I give myself these headaches. If you'll excuse me, I must find Walt." She turned to face him, her eyes gleaming as they seldom did. "I find this whole subject very distasteful, Bert. Let's not discuss it again." She moved away from him quickly.

Bert watched her go. Well, he thought, you can't be shot for trying. And it certainly has kept Walt noticing her all these years, whether she realizes it or not.

A shudder of anger riffled through Margaret as she moved among the crowd, nodding and smiling. Sally Young ran toward her, Blake Marcus in tow.

"He won me a big panda. Too big for me to carry. See?"

Blake's face twisted with a humorous sort of chagrin. "She would have me try." He didn't quite look at Margaret.

"And he hit the bull's-eye, right in the middle."

Margaret extended a hand to touch the straight dark hair. Like Nancy's had been. The anger came back. How dared he? Bert, who had known her so long, implying that she was jealous of Walt's work, his time. She shook her head. The stab of pain was there again. What does he know? she thought. A country doctor without time enough to read up on any of the new discoveries, new methods. He's a fine friend, but this time he's overstepped his knowledge and his place.

She smiled at Blake. "You're looking well." She was abashed at the expression of discomfort that rode his face. It was hard to talk to Blake, the rare times she saw him. Any little personal remark could so easily be misinterpreted. But Sally took the awkward moment with her as she pulled Blake along to the hot-dog stand.

Margaret moved ahead, peering to right and left for Walt. She supposed that Sally and Jerry and Gram and Blake were fed

in the kitchen, like servants, like a litter of dogs that must be kept out of the way of company. "I do not, I never did, and I never can, like that woman," she said to herself.

She liked her even less when she finally caught sight of her. Walt stood before the improvised bandstand, his face interested and alive in the brilliant light, so that even Margaret could see it clearly enough. Beside him, her arm latched tightly through his, was Jenny. Where Walt stood solidly, taking the whining hillbilly music through his ears only, Jenny moved, absorbing it with her body. And her movement, Margaret noted, walking steadily toward them, was all against Walt.

She went to stand quietly on Walt's unattached side. He turned to her at once and smiled widely.

"Pretty good, eh?" he asked.

She nodded. He leaned closer to her. "Oh, no, my dear," he said softly. "Not tonight?"

She nodded again.

"I'll take you home," he offered at once. He turned to Jenny. "It was a fine dinner, Jenny, as always. We're going now."

For a second, Jenny pulled herself closer to him. Then, her gaze calmly on Margaret, she released her own arm with great slowness, patted Walt's sleeve, and gave Margaret a half-smile.

The Arringtons walked slowly together, and the headache began to ease a little and Jenny's smile to fade.

Walt said, "I'd thought it would be good to ask the Beechams back for a nightcap."

Margaret said quickly, "Do that. I feel much better, really. It was—it was the Ferris wheel." Up there, way up there. What had Bert said? "Perspective, more ways than one?"

They found Anne and Paul a little apart from the crowd, as if in their newness they did not wish to intrude.

Walt felt a little breathless with his invitation on his lips. "Just a short one," he offered. "Thought you might like to see

my collection of models. Been fooling with them in my spare time for years. Duplicated almost every machine in the plant." He looked at Paul, but his focus encompassed Anne's quiet face, too.

She looks tired, he thought, but a little of the thing which was in her eyes that first day is gone. He sensed a strange stirring of pride in her.

Paul turned to Anne. "Yes?"

Anne smiled and nodded and stepped over to Margaret. "If you're sure you want us. . . . If you've had enough carnival."

"I've had enough. Enough until next year." Margaret and Anne stepped out ahead of the men. Walking behind them Walt noticed that from the back, except for their hair, you would not know the gap in their ages existed.

Paul was interested in those around him. "Who's that?" He pointed with his cigarette to a thin girl whose high giggle stretched above the other sounds.

"Bess Marr," Walt said. "Town bad woman."

Paul watched the girl lift a dart high into the air, shoot it straight to a balloon and double with laughter at the pop. The man with her grabbed her waist roughly and pulled her away, toward the alley of concessions.

Paul said, "A thing like this, a carnival or a circus, you see them all together, the big and the little, the good and the bad—"

"It's a good idea not to look at them too closely, sometimes," Walt said.

"I have to, if I'm going to write about them." Paul smiled.

Walt thought, You'll get to know which names go with which houses and how many children and when and why. You'll find out about the churches and those who go and those who don't. You'll write it all down in neat little rows and print it in your neat little paper. And we can read those notices, my young friend Paul, from now till doomsday, and not find out anything about the people. Not a thing at all.

It disturbed him, such thinking. He knew them all right. He was their friend. He didn't like his thoughts much, they didn't seem a part of him.

"We're glad to have you people here," he said brightly, leading the way up the wide, shallow steps of the Pillars. "You're a definite addition to the community." He smiled, the warm, good smile that always won him one in return.

But this serious young newspaperman weighed his words. "I'm glad you're glad," he said tritely. "But so far I'm a little unsure about the amount of my contribution to Marshville."

Walt put the key into the lock of the big door. He turned it, pushed the door open, and swept one arm out in a gesture of hospitality before he replied. Anne passed so close to him that he could smell the light, clean scent she wore, he could feel the little breeze the movement of her body made against his skin.

He shut the door and said to Paul, "A man, to get ahead, must have faith in himself and boundless enthusiasm for the work he is doing, whether it's a newspaper or a factory. Let's go fix a drink."

Paul followed him. "Don't you think those two intangibles are sometimes hard come by, Mr. Arrington?"

Walt laughed, pulling glasses down from the cupboards. "Call me Walt," he invited, "and the answer is yes indeed."

They sat on the wide back veranda that overlooked the moonlit garden, and from here the sound of the carnival was a hushed lullaby tune, all garishness gone, leaving it languid and pure.

Walt leaned back in his chair, sipping his drink with care, watching, in the darkness, the shape of Anne's head, the high light along her forearm, the ripple of the hem of her skirt as she moved slightly. The talk was easy and desultory, but when the Beechams rose to go Walt knew a sharp disappointment.

He put his arm around Margaret, there in the wide doorway, saying good night. He put it around her carefully, in case the headache was still with her, and because Paul's arm was tightly

around Anne's slim waist, because the two looked together and permanent and tight against intruders.

As they should be, he told himself firmly, turning out the lights and following Margaret upstairs. As they should be.

He lay awake for a long time and was furious with himself for doing so. Things at the plant were at that stage of expansion where they needed all his vigor and alertness. He was too old, he reminded himself, to lose sleep staring at a black ceiling.

"I forgot to show them my models," he said aloud, and after a time he slept.

When the door of the Pillars closed behind them, Anne moved herself from the circle of Paul's arm.

Paul drew a quick breath. "Anne," he whispered. Then aloud he said, "Fine people, aren't they?"

"I like Margaret Arrington."

"I like you."

The carnival lights showed the lack of expression on Anne's face, her slight shrug.

Paul said, "You don't have to shudder at the idea. I like you. I'm proud of you. Proud of the way you look among these people and the way they like you, too. Is there anything indecent in that?"

Anne said, "Please, Paul, don't spoil a good evening."

"Please, Paul," he mimicked.

They walked, surrounded by their silence, through the litter of papers and people that spelled out the end of a gay evening. Poppy stood beside his peanut stand and called out to them, "Good night, folks."

Paul watched Anne's face light up as she waved to the old man. His eyes stayed steady on her lips, the tilt of the corners of her eyes. Vicariously, he thought, I must warm myself at her response to an old man. He swallowed hard and moved his shoulders restlessly. Anne was right. There was no sense in spoiling a good

evening. And it had been a good one, with a feeling of ease and comradeship.

Walt Arrington had said that a man must have faith and boundless enthusiasm. Well, it need not apply only to work. It could apply to a man's feeling for his lost wife. Boundless faith that in time, in this place where she seemed to be content in every way but her relationship to him, he might once again move close and be welcomed.

"Got seven new subscriptions this week," he said cheerfully. "Two of them from Fairmount."

Anne smiled. "Isn't that fine? See, I knew you could put out a paper that they'd want to read."

"Well, it's not exactly a howling success yet," Paul said modestly, but he was pleased. At least she seemed genuinely interested. In some sections of him anyhow. "It's been hard work." He grinned. "I'm like a kid about any kind word that's tossed to me."

Anne kept her smile and it slid into her voice a small way. "I know you are."

To Paul, walking beside her, it sounded almost like an apology. As if she had said, "I'm sorry. Knowing how you love them, I wish I could toss you more."

Keep at it, boy, he jacked himself. Faith, enthusiasm, time, patience—all the platitudinous virtues are on your side. Keep at it.

The thought of Mrs. Lane's feather bed was kindly in his mind. You get tired being on your own.

An old colored man shuffled down the street, his flat feet matching the rhythm of the broom he pushed. Whish, whoosh, whish, whish. He whistled under his breath, the clear tone thickened by the absence of two front teeth. The carnival people were gone now. It'd been a treat to see the way they folded up them booths, all flat and proper like piled pans. And how that merry-go-round had got set on the big trailer, Gawd only knows. The



Ferris wheel minded him of the time his youngest got one of them metal sets you screw together, building and tearing down. All gone now. All the outside rush gone out of town. Just him and the strung lanterns. And the dirt. People for sure make a mess having themselves a high time. For sure they do.

In the darkness of the stairway to the paper store, Bess Marr sat quietly, looking up at the lanterns, which wriggled and blurred through her squinting eyes. On the floor before her the limp body of a man lay in the contorted relaxation of the passed-out. SnORES bubbled from his loose lips, crescendoed, stopped, began again.

Bess waggled her head at him. "Stay put then," she muttered. She reached over and slid one scrawny hand into his pocket. In the dark only loose change jangled in her palm. "Who cares?" she asked the blackness. "Leastwise he spent it on me."

She stood up uncertainly, flat-handed against the wall. Then she stooped over with great care to pick up a long-legged doll, limp and dangling. "Jo's gonna go for you," she whispered. And with the doll's cheap cloth cheek rubbing against hers, she made her way slowly up the narrow steps.

Mr. and Mrs. Paul Beecham (Ye  
Ed and Spouse) are at home  
to their friends at their new  
residence, 107 Sassafras Street.  
[*Marshville Herald*, September  
18]

## 12

Martha Evans walked ahead of Anne up the narrow hedge-lined path. She crossed the shadowed porch and put the old key in the lock.

"Usually," she called over her shoulder, "we leave doors open in Marshville. Never had a robbery that I can recall."

Anne said nothing. She stood, halfway up the path, cool under the thickness of the elm tree, and studied the house. It was small and white and it had a lonely, waiting air about it.

Martha pushed the door open. "It smells musty. Only trouble with this climate. Rust and must." Why doesn't she come? she thought. She's a queer one, all right. Either so quiet or so light-talking.

Anne moved slowly up behind her. It will be dark and grim, she warned herself. It can't possibly be as right inside as it is out. But she knew as she stepped across the threshold that she was wrong. The sunlight pushed everywhere through the casement windows, seeking out the old bricks of the fireplace, the white of the built-in corner cupboards, the sprightly floral sprigs of the wallpaper.

"Happy people lived here," she said.

Martha was silent, staring down at the fireplace where apple wood was neatly laid in a criss-cross, ready pattern. Anne touched the window sills. Her fingers came away dust-free. She looked at the random-width floor boards. They gleamed with wax.

"But they must have moved out just yesterday," she murmured. "Everything is so fresh."

Martha shook her head. "They left over fifteen years ago." She didn't elaborate. Briskly she pulled out an envelope from the pocket of her green dress. "Here is the rental contract," she went on. "No doubt you'd like to go over it with your husband."

Anne took the papers. They felt at once warm and cool in her hands, and familiar, as if she had read them and signed them in some other life.

Martha said, "I'd buy you a Coke, but I have to get back. It's really a very nice little house—" Her voice trailed off.

Anne smiled. "Isn't it?" Suddenly she felt wonderful. "It's the nicest house I've ever seen, and we thank you, Miss Evans. It was thoughtful of you."

Martha pushed a hand in negation. "They'd never rent it before," she explained. "At least, she wouldn't. But when I mentioned you folks, he thought it was a grand idea. I guess he finally persuaded her." She grinned, swung around, and the sound of her sensible heels receded, seeming to leave echoes behind them in the empty rooms.

Anne stood still and let the house welcome her. The space between the windows invited their comfortable old davenport. The white ruffled curtains folded in cartons at the warehouse were exactly right for the windows themselves. The rugs she had braided when she was first married would enhance the fine old floors.

I can make a home here, she thought. With all of our things around us again, some of the strangeness will surely go from me, and it will be the way it used to be. She walked dreamily toward the back of the house, to the neat little kitchen, not modern, but carefully planned to save time and energy. I will have something to do and a place to be.

She realized, staring out of the window above the sink, noting how hidden and gracious the small garden was, that there

had been a need in her to have a place to be. Mrs. Lane, even in the big old house, had a way of pushing her personality through walls. Her sighs were audible through open doors. Her solid self, sitting hour after hour before the front window, gave off an aura of self-love, pity, and misery that was almost tangible.

To go to the *Herald* was no solution. There Paul, busy and harried, seemed to expect a help of her that she didn't have to give.

"If you could only type," he moaned.

She tried it, picking out letter by letter with tense unwilling fingers until she made Paul nervous, and he pushed her aside, to set his own flexible hands upon the keys and play a chattering tune.

Outdoors it was better. To get away from the town itself was a matter of walking only a few blocks. To the east, across the highway, a wide white road wound over flat land until it became flanked by the high grasses of the marshland, and the pungent odor seemed to fill the world. The north road led past houses so tired and old they humped their backs, as people lasting long beyond their time are apt to do. The south road rambled, shaded and languid, past rich farmlands to an ancient cemetery, secret behind its crumbling rock walls.

But it was the west road that most often coaxed Anne's feet, leading as it did to the bright freshness of a small stream, a sharp contrast to the muddied tidewaters. There was a place like a house, with an open window, a soft floor of grass, a semi-circle of trees, completely hiding her from the road and open only upon the stream itself. Until Martha had led her to this house, that had become her home.

She didn't hear footsteps, so that the soft touch on her shoulder frightened her, sent her head in a quick swing, and her heart in a sharp dip. She glanced down at the shoes. They were the gum-soled, practical white ones that Margaret Arrington always wore.

"I didn't hear you." Anne tried to bring a smile to her lips. "You startled me."

Margaret's eyes looked more fogged than ever in the unnatural flush of her face. Anne was aware of the other woman's tenseness.

"I'm sorry," Margaret offered. Her slow gaze moved away from Anne, moved around the kitchen, peered outward toward the garden, came back to the little dining room. "You like it?"

"Love it," Anne cried enthusiastically.

Margaret nodded, as if no other answer were conceivable. "I knew you would," she said in her childlike voice. "I knew you would fit and—and that you'd be happy here."

Anne spoke slowly. "I can't understand. It looks as if it had just been cleaned."

The flush on Margaret's face deepened. "It has, every Friday morning."

It began to come to Anne then. What was it Jenny had said? "The old girl goes in search of her youth once a week." A beauty parlor, Anne had surmised, vaguely sorry for all women who struggled to retain or regain what had once so easily been theirs.

"Sara?" Anne asked now.

Embarrassment sat awkwardly on the face that was usually so controlled. Margaret shook her head.

She's as locked in as I am, Anne thought, but for different reasons. She noted it impersonally, the way she had watched everyone for some time now. It was a little hard to get used to, the knowledge that she didn't care about Margaret Arrington at all, or why she flushed, or even why she was there. It chilled her. People had always been important.

She said, in the light, brisk tone that covered it all, "I thought maybe blue dotted curtains here. You think?"

A little of the red went out of Margaret's cheeks. "I had red checked gingham. It was quite the thing then."

Anne nodded. "It would be nice even now."

Margaret took her hand. "Come walk with me, Anne," she invited. "Let's walk out West Street."

They didn't lock the door this time. They sauntered together, the tall young woman and the tall older woman with the young body, past the Episcopal Church, past the town's outlying garage, and cross-country on the dusty, rutted lane. Margaret didn't talk. She stepped out with a swing that showed walking was one of her pleasures, on familiar paths, on the good days. Anne was unsurprised when she followed the other woman through the narrow lane that led to the circle of trees and the view of the stream.

Margaret stood for a long moment, looking out over the bright narrow band of water. She sighed at last, louder than she knew, and turned to Anne.

"Walt asked me to marry him here. Right here. This very spot."

Anne's mind knew a frantic scrabbling, a totally unexpected desire to run away from any weakening of this woman's reserve, even as she recognized the confidence for what it was, an overture which once she would have considered of great value. Was it going to be like this always, then? First with Paul and now with friends? This lack of feeling, this cold desire to keep her distance.

She forced interest into her eyes and smiled, not able to manage the come-on words that would have been real. But Margaret, once started, having found a woman she liked and trusted, a woman unimpressed with her social importance in the community, needed little encouragement.

She turned to Anne and was totally unaware of the gentleness on her own face, the sweetness of her lips. "We were so happy in the little house, Anne. My baby was born there—" Her eyes looked back. . . .

Anne shuddered a little. There was some feeling left, some emotion in her. She asked quickly, "I haven't heard much about your daughter. Where does she live?"

"England. Isn't that a strange thing? That a little girl from Marshville could marry a foreigner and bear her children in a great stone place—so far away—" She stopped.

The words, "intolerably lonely," went through Anne. But coolly again, as if she had read them.

"Walt says—" she began, and changed it abruptly. "Your husband was telling me about the grandchildren—at—at Jenny's party."

Margaret nodded. "He carries pictures of them. He doted on Nancy. It was hard for him to let her go."

Anne said, "Yes."

Margaret looked backward again. "Walt worked hard those early days. He was always so eager to come home. We had so many friends. They all dropped in." She frowned a little. "Nobody drops in at the Pillars. They seem to need a special invitation." She sighed again. "I never wanted to move. Walt laughed at me. The little house was paid for and he gave it to me."

Like a necklace, Anne thought.

A hint of embarrassment came back. "You mustn't think I'm not happy at the Pillars. I am, truly. But every Friday I spend a little time freshening up the old house. It's silly, I suppose. But it makes me feel—I seem to see—everything about it is filled with color—sunshine—" She rubbed her hands nervously together. She swallowed hard. "I can see Nancy laugh with her head tossed back. And Walt working in the garden. I can even hear the—the nighttime whispers—back in the little house."

She swung around and faced the stream and Anne knew from the arch of her shoulders that she was fighting tears.

I ought to be all broken up about it, Anne thought, but I'm not. It's just like a story to me, and there's no reason for her to sob because her husband has succeeded and placed her in that exquisite setting.

Walt's face came sharp to her, leaning toward her a little, looking close and interested, eager with the things he had to say. The Tuesday nights had meant nothing to her until this moment,

but now, like the disclosure that she no longer cared about the trials of those around her, they gained importance.

By accident, she had told herself, when she thought of it at all, Walt just happened to be walking by the library, or walking out of the library on Tuesday nights as she left. There was only that three-block walk to Mrs. Lane's house. Only fragments of thoughts that held no particular undertones, never a repetition of that first rainy night, when, perceptive and lonely, she had spun out her feeling about the dying man across the street. The dead man from across the street, she corrected herself.

For the first time she asked herself why she had allowed those walks. What was there about Walt Arrington that soothed her a little, as Sara and the green maze had done that first day? The answer came at once. Walt was strong, there was purpose in him, a definitive knowledge of himself and his place in the world. Not like Paul, who was fumbling as she was fumbling, toward a new beginning. Walt was sure of himself, confident that the town depended on him, enormously successful in his business.

She could see, looking at Margaret, why Walt was of such importance to his wife. If Anne could sense his vitality and steal a little of it in those odd moments, that vitality must have been a complete nourishment for Margaret. Watching her, Anne knew that the next time she would be waiting to see if Walt were there. Or else she would avoid going to the library that particular night. In either case, the handful of Tuesday evening walks was spoiled. Like so much else.

Had Margaret heard of them? she wondered suddenly. Perhaps that was the purpose of this sentimental walk back to her beginnings. Even of renting them the house.

But watching the other woman turn, once more calm, she knew that wasn't so. Margaret was shut off from much of Marshville's meanness by more than her dimming sight. Her good spirit, her childlike simplicity, her delicacy, were triple protections.

Margaret took Anne's arm, "I must get back. We're having



guests from the city for dinner. Walt wants everything just right."

Anne nodded, bending her head to evade a low-hanging branch.

Margaret went on, "I just wanted you to know, Anne. In all these years I've run away from the thought of anybody else living in our house. Until I saw you and Paul. Your—specialness. How close you are. Then I knew it was all right for you to have it."

How can it be, Anne wondered, putting her feet down carefully, keeping her mouth steady, her eyes down, that we don't shout it to the whole world? How can people look at a marriage and say it is a good one, when everything is wrong and there is decay in the middle of it that may never see the sun enough to heal?

But she is partially right, Anne admitted. We are close sometimes. Only it is worse than the moments we are separated. Because it is not a true closeness. It is the echo of happiness, just the habit, the pattern, we established those other years. A facsimile only and not to be confused with the real thing.

Those other years. A longing for them rose in Anne's throat, and for a moment she knew how it was with Margaret, seeking back still further. She said, not troubling to make her voice eager, "You've made us both very happy. It will be a privilege to live in your house."

Both. When Paul didn't even know about it.

Margaret studied Anne's face carefully for a moment. She said at last, "You and Paul are special, you know. Never doubt it."

It seemed to Margaret a very sad state of affairs that there was no small thing which could make her happy, could enchant her. Back in those other days, the arrangement of six daisies in a blue bowl could set her up. A bauble put on her arm by Walt, seldom of any value, could shimmer a whole day through. A new set of salt and pepper shakers to add to the collection in the built-in cupboards warmed her heart.

Where had it gone, that delight in small possessions which had made up so much of her life? There was perfection all around her now, and unless she decided to change a color scheme, or buy new draperies, or choose with careful taste an ensemble of clothes, nothing was new.

I'd like, she thought grimly, to do the living room with purple walls and wild red draperies. She smiled. Oyster white? she asked herself seriously, her attention caught. It came picture clear, the long, lovely room, white walls, white draperies—she shook her head.

"Too antiseptic," she said aloud.

Anne turned a startled face to her and Margaret smiled. "A white living room," she explained.

We live in boxes, Anne thought, and thank God for it. She put her feet upon the pavement's beginning, and for the first time she was glad to leave that hidden place by the brook. Glad because she would have a home to go to. There was a lot to do.

The Marshville Episcopal Church was the scene of the annual fashion show on Wednesday evening last. It was well attended and many local ladies took part, not only in the modeling, but in the purchasing of raiment with which to deck themselves. Among those who modeled clothes were: Mrs. Bert Young, Mrs. Walt Arrington, Mrs. Paul Beecham, and ... [*Marshville Herald*, October 23]

## 13

Jenny Young watched from the wide casement of her bedroom window and it seemed to her that Marshville was a ghost town. As far as she could see the trees were silver, covered with the frozen rain that signaled winter. The slick sidewalks intimidated all but the most courageous feet, and the air held the chill that was never quite cleanly sharp, but always tainted with moisture.

Gram sat quietly in the rocking chair allowed to her. Her hands, knotted with the arthritis that Bert mourned but couldn't help, moved slowly among a mountain of socks, sorting and rolling.

"No day out for man or beast," she remarked to Jenny's back.

Man or beast. The words went around in Jenny's mind. No men. No beastly men. No manly beasts.

"Nothing ever happens in this damned town," she snapped. She turned around. For a moment she caught Gram's startled eyes. You'd think they'd fade after that many years.

"There's Mrs. Arrington's open house to look forward to, come Christmas," Gram suggested timidly. The spark of excitement was in her eyes.

Margaret Arrington invited everybody, but literally, Jenny

thought. It was Gram's one social event of any year, and she looked forward to it with an anticipation wildly beyond the dim corner she would occupy for most of the evening and the one glass of champagne she would allow herself.

"Nobody's seen that purple thing I bought last week," Jenny tossed out carelessly. "You can have it if you like." She looked away from the expression on Gram's face. Goes to pieces every time she thinks I'm softening.

"I thought you were going to send it back," Gram said quietly. "I wouldn't want to interfere with that."

So she knows and who cares? In the city bank Jenny sometimes counted over the money, the small secure safe-deposit room enclosing her. There was quite a bit of it and she felt she had earned every cent. Locked up in a town like this, twice seeing her body grow gross, twice going through that stinking hysterical pain, putting up with Gram, putting up with Bert, putting up with the years and the miserable, heart-breaking, horrible way they slid into one another.

My God, her mind ground frantically, something has to happen to me, to me. I can't wait forever, because the things I have to have are young things, and if they started tomorrow, today, this very minute, it would be too late for some of them, for some of the best of them.

She stood up and walked past Gram in her bare feet, swung open the closet door and with the dress in her hand felt a fierce desire to knot it in a ball and throw it in Gram's face. But it wasn't Gram's fault, this wildness that filled her. She made herself walk back across the room and lay the dress in Gram's lap.

She said furiously, "The stores have refunded me eight hundred and two dollars this year. Call it a Christmas present."

She picked up a file from the litter of her dressing table and worked on the edge of a broken nail. Now, how in hell did the old lady ever find out about the clothes? It was a secret sort of deal and it took a lot of doing.

Was a time, she thought, biting carefully at a bit of hangnail,

that Bert handed over whatever I asked him for. But in the past five years he's clammed up on the dough like a Scotchman. If he'd ever collect his bills he'd have enough for almost any expense.

When he dies, she planned, playing one of her favorite games, those cadging old-timers all over the county are going to see another side of the tree. I'll get a good lawyer and we'll clamp down on them like a mushrat trap.

It tickled her, so that she smiled. She walked to the window, the squeak of Gram's rocker following her.

"Hold that thing still, can't you?" she cried.

The squeak stopped at once.

Down the street, just discernible from the window's far edge, the Beechams' house looked like a Christmas card. Christmas. The Beechams. Now there's a pair. How I hate every hair on her flat head! Her and her smooth, straight way of walking, the flip, silly things she says that make everybody laugh, and all those books she reads. Even the way she's furnished the house. Not an antique in it.

Jenny mimicked the smile on Anne's face, her words. "If they have been in the family for generations," Anne had said, "I can see the point of being uncomfortable to please your ancestors. But just to go out and buy them—" She had moved her shoulders slightly, and all the dumb dames with their houses loaded full of relics passed along to them had chortled.

I wasn't supposed to hear that one. I walked into the drugstore just in time. So my old man didn't leave me any antiques. Or maybe he did, antiquer than the rest of the junk around here. Dirtier and more worn out anyhow. So I had to go buy what I wanted. But I bought the best, didn't I? I learned and studied and found out what went with what, and I got the best. Bert wasn't always so stingy.

When did he start to get stingy? Maybe when he found out about Blake and me—no, it was after that. Along about the time when he gave me that dough and I went to the city. For a week, all alone in the city.

Her glance turned inward away from the icy street. That had been a week, all right. She could still feel the tickle of excitement she'd got walking across the wide lobby, feeling the looks that followed her. Nobody here, by God, knew that she had a great, loutish son and a whining small baby back in a hick town. They thought she was somebody, all right, with her Persian coat loose-swinging away from the satin dress that fitted all the vital spots just right, and her hair, freshly rinsed to shimmering black, touching her shoulders suggestively. Even the hotel clerk—boy, did he turn out to be a lemon.

But the drummer in the bar, and the kid who had a bit part in that musical, and who was the other one—that gray-haired guy who had scared her a little, almost like Joe had that day when the old man—

"I wonder where Sally is," Gram's voice broke in, seeming sharp in the still room.

"Who cares?" Jenny snapped. She drew a little circle on the steamed window, put an X in the middle of it, and wiped it off. Gram rose, sighing, bundled the socks in her apron, and shuffled out of the room.

Blake now, something had happened to him since last summer. He hadn't come near her. Hadn't tried to touch her even. When he came home to dinner he was proper and polite, hot mush wouldn't melt in his mouth, and he disappeared to his room right after. He said no to the cocktails, too, which was surprising in itself and gave him a new look.

She said to Bert, sneering a little, "Your precious cousin's on the wagon, believe it or not."

Bert nodded, watching the doorway through which Blake had disappeared. "So he is," he agreed. "Color in his cheeks again, and his hands have stopped shaking."

"So he thinks he can turn it off," she laughed, thinking not altogether of liquor. "That's a laugh."

Bert stood over her for a moment, solemn as an owl. "He'd

better not get any extra temptation, Jenny," he suggested quietly. "What he's doing isn't easy—but it can be done."

She crossed her legs and looked up at Bert. Something stirred in her. Did Bert mean he could turn it off, too? Is that what he thought he had done? A little ripple of adventure went over her skin. She reached up a hand to Bert's lapel. She pulled him toward her, off balance, clumsy, surprised. He resisted at first and she felt excitement rise in her like foam. His mouth looked warm and strong and his hands, flexible and deft, were capable of many things besides surgery.

Then his weight was against her, his mouth, his hands, and his voice, ragged and begging, cried, "Jenny, Jenny, Jenny."

She pushed him away, as suddenly as she had pulled him toward her. It wasn't easy to do, until he hesitated for a moment and looked closely at her face.

"You're wrinkling my dress." She let the expression he hated most, disdainful, filled with distaste, lift her lips and her eyebrows.

Maybe this time, she thought, the touch of excitement dying slowly, he'll show me a thing or two.

But he didn't, of course. He loosened his arms, pulled himself straight, and smoothed his clothes. Then he turned abruptly and walked into his office.

For a moment too small to be reckoned, a disappointment so great she could sob with it took full hold of her. Then she thought, Wouldn't you think he'd have more pride? Whose wife am I, for God's sake?

Too easy, she thought now, pacing restlessly around the room. Like Blake. Like all the others. Except Joe—and that guy with the gray hair—

She swung abruptly to the mirror, pulled a comb through her hair, touched her mouth with fresh lipstick, put on her shoes, and ran lightly up the stairs to the third floor. The sound of Blake's typewriter grew louder as she climbed. She stood for a moment

getting her breath outside the door. The keys of the machine made a steady rhythm. She could see the room. It was long and low, and Blake had built bookshelves all around it. He had filled it with odds and ends of Gram's old, comfortable furniture and he had bought a flat secondhand desk which sat under the windows. He had a hot plate up there. Sometimes he made coffee to sober himself up. And there were a hundred hiding places for the bottles Bert used to try to keep away from him.

She knocked lightly. The rhythm didn't stop. She pounded her fist on the door, suddenly grateful that Jerry was out, probably hanging around the *Herald* office as usual, that Sally was playing somewhere, and that Gram was in the kitchen.

The typewriter stopped. Blake's voice called, "Go away. I'm busy."

She made her voice low and as intimate as the door would allow. "I just want to talk to you a minute, Blake. Let me in."

There was a pause. "I'll see you later—at dinner."

"It will be too late then."

She heard his footsteps, slow, filled with thoughtfulness. The key turned in the lock and the door swung open a small way. Jenny pushed it wider, pushed herself around Blake, and sauntered to the middle of the room.

He left the door open. He pulled a cigarette from the pack, lit it with fairly steady fingers and asked, "What's so important?"

Jenny shrugged. "It's a mean day. I'm bored and you've been ducking me. Why?"

The cigarette trembled a little. "I've been busy," he repeated. "I'm busy now."

She walked closer to him. "Are you?" she asked softly. "Are you?"

He stood firm for a moment, then he backed away, in step with her, almost as if they were doing a rhumba. It struck Jenny funny. She laughed.

Blake stopped moving. "Funny thing," he said, "you have such a good laugh. A hearty chuckle almost."



She was close to him now, her face lifted, her arms reaching up. When her hands clasped together behind his neck and his eyes were near, she closed her own.

He was the one who laughed then, his own hearty, amused chuckle.

She pulled herself violently away, and for a moment felt both her eyes and her mouth widen in amazement. Then she raced around him, slammed the door viciously behind her, and ran swiftly down the stairs.

This house, she thought frantically, I've got to get out of here. She grabbed a coat from the hall closet and without rubbers, slipping and sliding, she hurried down the street toward town.

After a while her breath came more slowly. Well, what did you want? she asked herself. It's going to take some doing, and maybe it will be fun all over again. Blake, who'd ever thought it? All firm and righteous and scornful. Blake.

Without thinking, she turned into the path to Anne Beecham's house. She opened the door and called, "Yoo-hoo."

Anne's voice called back, "Come in."

"I am in." Jenny dropped her coat on the hall chair, scraped the ice off her shoes onto the waxed floor and smoothed back her hair with one hand.

The fire was going and Anne sat before it, one of her eternal books in her hand.

"Must be nice," Jenny said, walking across the room, "not to have anything to do but read." She dropped into the chair opposite Anne's, spread her legs comfortably and pulled her skirt above her knees.

Anne looked at her knees, quietly, consideringly.

"What you need is a couple of kids to occupy you." Jenny listened to her voice. It was just dandy, needling enough and yet friendly. "It's a wonderful experience, motherhood." Yipe, my voice slipped a little there.

Anne's lips raised a small smile, the secret kind that made

Jenny want to scratch her eyes out. "You've found it so, I gather?" she asked gently.

Jenny leaned forward and scratched the bottom of her foot where the high arch stood away from the sandal. Quite suddenly she remembered the feeling of not being able to reach over like that, burdened with a child. "Yeah," she murmured. "Yeah, yeah." She sat up again. "Of course," she purred, "I know exactly how you must feel. It would be such a shame to take any chances with that perfect figure of yours. And then—it takes courage, you know. It hurts—quite a bit."

Ah, I got her, she thought triumphantly, watching the color come high in Anne's cheeks and fade from her mouth. For the first time that day she felt warm and relaxed. She sat back.

Anne swallowed. "Would you like a cup of tea?" Her voice wasn't quite steady, like Blake's cigarette.

Jenny echoed the word. "Tea? No thanks. But I could stand a drink. Your adorable Paul got any liquor around?" Score two, she added, her eyes intent on the flicker of Anne's lids.

"I'll fix you one." Anne rose, taller than Jenny by a head, all of her sex buried under a cool, misty cover. Damn her, Jenny thought, restless again, watching the long, slim legs move smoothly under the tight skirt, what right has she got to come into this town and do in six months what it took me years to do?

The Marshville Episcopal Church gave a fashion show every year. One of the big shops from the city sent out the clothes—luscious coats, dresses, formals, costume jewelry, accessories. They sent out a commentator, too. It took four years, but the fourth year and every one since, Jenny had been the chief model, with the best of the clothes.

Everybody came from all the counties around. Ah, but it was fun to parade out there on the ramp, to turn and posture and look down on the faces of the women, the heavy ones, the skinny ones, the too-old ones. It was fun to watch the faces of their men,

too, and Jenny knew exactly what they were thinking. She did what she could to aid and abet their thoughts.

Back in the days when Blake had the false idea he had something to say about her, he'd told her, "I don't like it. I wish you wouldn't."

"What," she'd asked in dainty surprise, "not model in a nice little church fashion show?"

"It's not that at all when you do it," he'd said miserably.

"And what is it?" she taunted.

"It's Minsky's," he exploded. "It's strip tease and burlesque jokes—"

She smiled now, thinking of him, but the smile didn't last long. He was the only one who said anything. The women, sure, they probably said plenty, to each other and to their poor little husbands. But nobody mentioned it to her. Nobody dared.

But now this Anne Beecham got the choice of clothes somehow. It was a subtle ganging up, too slick for Jenny to get her hands on, or her tongue. But it just happened that the most glamorous gowns fitted Anne perfectly, the best music was played behind her movements, and there was none of Minsky's in the way Anne glided down the ramp. It was, darn her eyes, queenly.

Jenny stood up quickly. She walked into the kitchen. Anne stood, a tray of ice cubes melting in her hand, immobile and rigid, staring out over the frozen garden.

"Lost my thirst," Jenny said. "Looks like you did, too." What goes through a head like that, she wondered, in a moment of rare curiosity. Sure thing, she hates my guts.

And who cares? she asked herself defiantly. Who cares? "Ta-ta," she said, not even looking to see if Anne turned. "Gotta go. When you gotta, you gotta."

She grabbed her scarf, slipped her coat over her shoulders, hurried as much as she could down the slippery porch steps, and ran into Paul in front of the house.

She leaned toward him, tipping her face up, patting the lapel

of his heavy coat. All she said was, "Home early, aren't you, big boy?"

But she took a while saying it, and a corner of her vision was directed at the front windows. Hoping, hoping, that Anne would see her like this with her husband.

Your Editor and Blake Marcus  
had a harrowing adventure in the  
swamps last Saturday. Results:  
Safe return, no ducks. [*Marsh-*  
*ville Herald*, November 13]

14

Paul watched the false play of expression on Jenny's face. He answered her question. "Nice day for an open fire and a drink before dinner, I figured." He smiled.

It was easier to smile now, in Marshville, in the *Herald* office, on the streets, and in the homes of friends. He did have friends here. He had those times late at night when Bert dropped in and all the things they talked about. He had Walt, who seemed to be an impersonal cuss, but was always glad to see him. He had Jerry, who had promised, just to oblige Paul, to catch midyear entrance at a good journalism school. And he had Blake.

Blake was the one.

Back there, last August, he had walked in.

"Just came to thank you for running my golden words," he said, trying to make little of it, to pretend it didn't matter. "I had no idea how good it would be to see them in print again."

Somehow Paul felt embarrassed. He was afraid his voice would come out patronizing if he said anything. He merely nodded.

Blake looked embarrassed then. "You busy?"

Paul shook his head and cleared his throat. "Nope," he managed. "Even time for a cup of coffee if you'd like it."

"I'd like it," Blake said and settled himself.

That had started it. Blake came often and for many reasons, as Paul learned. He came because hidden carelessly in his worn coat pocket there was an editorial or a batch of local news. He

came because the urge of liquor was strong in him and the coffee helped a little. He came because it was some place away from Jenny when Bert was out on his calls. For a long time he came to escape.

But after a while, and Paul could almost put his finger on the moment, he came because Paul welcomed him, because in the weekly putting together of the paper, Paul needed him.

With a man like Blake there was little probing of the mind. It was good and relaxing. Paul knew that in the year before he and Anne came to Marshville there had been too much analysis, too much playing around with the motives, the hidden secret springs. He knew that he had scraped himself raw inside, and it would take a long time to heal from the inside out. He had an idea that it was for Blake as it was for him. The problems were different, and yet they were alike. The problem of failure in relation to those around you. Most of all, the problem of failing yourself, of never managing to be what you could be. Blake helped him with the healing.

Blake asked, "Ever been gunning?"

Paul shook his head.

So one morning, dimmed with fog, chilled with the echo of night air, they climbed into the old convertible and drove cross-country to the marshes. They parked beside a deserted farmhouse leaning away from its rotting foundations. They walked down to one of the tidewater streams that made a maze, like the Pillars' boxwood, through acres of tall grasses.

Blake pushed an old gray boat out into the water, and for a long time there was only the rhythm of the oars counterpointed by the unhappy, sighing rustle of the wind through high marsh sticks. Paul leaned back and let the grayness soak through him, cooling all brighter colors in his mind, in his body.

After a while they tied the boat to a finger of wood anchored deep in the water. Blake pushed aside the grasses and revealed a small hidden room, like a child's tree house. It had a platform and a bench, and once inside nothing was visible except the sky.

They sat in silence, waiting for the imperious barking cry of the ducks. Paul closed his eyes, and a velvet sort of peace enwrapped him.

Blake's voice was part of it. "I usually bring a bottle. Today I told myself we didn't need it." He reached into the gunny sack beside his shotgun and pulled out a thermos. As he unscrewed it, Paul caught the odor of fresh, strong coffee.

Between swallows Blake went on. "Let them get as close as you can," he instructed. "We'll have to do our own retrieving." He smiled. "Once I had a Chesapeake. Beautiful, oily, dirty old fellow. He never wrinkled a feather bringing them back. Wonderful dog, the Chesapeake."

To Paul's questioning look he explained, "Gave him to a man in the country when I moved in with Bert. Too messy for—" He stopped.

Paul realized that he had never heard Blake mention Jenny's name.

Far on the air, like the silken forward-spitting of a crab spider, was tossed a slim ribbon of sound. Blake rose noiselessly to his feet, reached stealthily for his gun, nodded to Paul, and pushed aside the grasses.

Paul tried to imitate his smooth, professional movements. He felt clumsy and unbalanced, clutching the firearm with which he was so unfamiliar, feeling the cold go through the cloth of his trousers to settle tensely on his legs.

Blake pointed a finger. Against the sky, still gray although the morning was no longer new, six black dots moved in precision and grace. They grew larger, extended long arrows of necks and held their wings so still, except for banking, that it seemed they must each contain a small motor, like an airplane, in the oval of their bodies.

The first real excitement Paul had ever heard in him lit Blake's whisper. "You want the first one?" he asked.

It was like the time a neighbor had offered Paul the biggest piece of candy. To be remembered. But this wasn't candy, which

anybody could chew. This was a skill, and Paul found himself shaking his head.

Blake's gun moved slickly to his shoulder. The tired skin of his face doubled on itself as he bent to sight. Paul shifted his glance quickly from the intent man to the ducks. For a breathless, fragile moment they came straight on. Then when the tension seemed unbearable, when Paul's ears braced themselves for the shattering crash of the gun so near them, the birds, as if pulled by a string, arched against the sky in a semicircle, curved their necks away, and became once more frustrating and distant dots.

"Damn it to hell," Blake cried loudly. He sat down heavily on the bench. "Wish I'd brought that bottle," he smiled sourly. "I could do with one after that."

Paul saw with surprise that Blake's hands were shaking, that his lips trembled. He realized vaguely what a tremendous effort it was for this man, sober, to tense himself for any kind of decisive action.

Paul sat down. His feet, in the galoshes that were no substitute for boots, felt heavy and numb. What do you say to Blake Marcus, when even the birds stay out of range? When so many things are out of range?

Paul began to talk, not thinking about it especially, letting some instinct take over.

"This is the first time I've ever hunted. You're lucky to have been brought up like this. With the outdoors around you and free to roam it. Me"—he shrugged—"I have a civilized eye, I guess. Space like this scares the hell out of me. My mother—oh, she was a good mother, don't get me wrong—made a soft little box around me and kept me in it. My father died when I was young. She couldn't risk me. You know?"

Blake was looking at him now, and the shaking had stopped. Like they say, put off that drink from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, and the need will die, slowly, agonizingly, but it'll die.



Paul went on mildly, "I hardly ever did anything I wanted to. Any of the regular-boy dangerous things. After a while I stopped wanting to. That's not good, I suppose."

Blake nodded. "There's a lot I can show you," he said. "Walking the hedgerows for quail—now there's a sport. And down by the Squomie River the fish—" He spread his hands wide. "And fighters every one. Racing to white water on the bay—"

"White water?" Paul prodded gently.

"They come up to the surface to eat, see? They spray the water six feet high, and you race to get there. You put down a line." He chuckled. "Silly buggers. They'll jump all around you and never touch your bait—" He smoothed the barrel of his gun. Paul noticed the square backs of his hands, the strong splayed fingers.

Blake lifted his head to the sky, glanced at his watch. "Eleven-fifteen. And still dark as dawn. It's blowing up a gust for sure." He stood up. "Parkins, farmer from outside town, has a blind about a mile farther up. Let's try that."

They had gone perhaps halfway when the gust struck. At first it was only wind, a driving, persistent, steady push that leaned against the prow of the boat and made useless matchsticks of the oars. After a little, rain added itself to the wind. It was cold as sleet, and as angled, as concentrated, so that it seemed to strike against them in silver needles.

Blake yelled, above the sudden tumult, "Got to get over to the side, out of the tide. Pull grass."

Paul sat silently in the back of the boat. He was quickly and absolutely soaked to the skin, his windbreaker cold against him, the sharp knobs of his knees showing through the gabardine trousers. He watched, almost impersonally, the way Blake struggled to get the boat sidewise, to maneuver it into a smaller runnel of stream. He noticed, seeing it really for the first time, that each stream had small tributaries, like the branches of a tree, and that as far as he could see those little creeks angled and circled and curled. He swung his head around, looking for the farm-

house. It was out of sight. There was no tree, no dwelling, no sign of firm land. There were only the rushes, growing so thickly from their beds of slime and quicksand that they gave the impression of solidity.

Blake reached out toward the grasses. "Damned tide," he yelled again. "It's trying to pull us right out to sea."

Paul thought, there's an ocean out there. An ocean in this wind, with this lashing rain, piling itself mile high in breakers. He started to shiver, first with the cold, then with an emotion he wouldn't admit to himself. Blake grew dim before his eyes, leaning over the side of the boat, grabbing desperately at the reeds, pulling the old craft against the powerful combination of wind and rain and tide.

It started to grow in Paul and it mushroomed until the taste of it spewed against the back of his throat. There had never been anything in his life to prepare him for this, to teach him to face the sheer force, the exultant rioting, which beat upon him now.

Nobody knows where I am, he thought wildly, shaking his head from right to left, trying to see through the rain, through his fear, across the great rippling plateaus of marsh. Anne was asleep last night, asleep this morning. I didn't even leave a note.

He saw her very clearly, remotely, small, like a figure in the reverse end of a pair of binoculars. I wanted her last night and I let her sleep. I've waited like a puppy dog for her to turn to me. I wanted her and I didn't have her and now we can rot out here, this drunken bum and I. We can ride through the tide-waters, and they'll get narrower and narrower until we're marooned and hidden and night will come and day and they'll never think to look for us here. That abandoned farmhouse. Blake and his drunken disappearances that alarm nobody.

He was suddenly aware of Blake's voice, wild and angry. He was aware of Blake's red face, leaning as much toward him as was possible without releasing his grip on the grasses.

"You goddamn little yellow squirt," Blake was crying. "You

white-livered Sunday Mama's boy. Get off your scrawny ass and pull! You hear me, *pull grass!*" He reached down toward the oar and Paul never doubted that he'd use it to clout him across the side of the head if necessary.

Anger lifted Paul to his feet, giving strength to his frozen legs and his numb hands. He reached for the grass, he pulled with Blake. Slowly, slowly, the boat began to hold its own, began to push its nose into the tide. Achingly, painfully, they moved inch by inch against the gale.

It seemed to go on for hours. But heat was in Paul, and he didn't notice the dankness of his clothes. The bastard, the cheap two-timing, gin-swigging bastard. Who was he to call names? When we get out of here, Paul promised himself, not even in his mind saying "if," I'm going to beat the guts out of him. With my own two hands. I'll show him who's yellow. I'll show him who's a Mama's boy.

He hadn't been so mad since the sixth grade, when a bigger boy had broken his glasses and stepped on them. He sure as hell would have given the boy the beating of his life, too, if his mother hadn't seen the whole thing and come to his rescue.

They were panting like fighters in the last round when they finally reached the second blind. Blake tied the boat, hands moving thickly against the post, the rope. He picked up his gun and the sack. He stepped carefully, his clothes pasted against him by the wind, into the slight shelter of the blind. Then he reached out a hand for Paul.

With a furious dignity Paul ignored the hand. He stepped from the boat, reached one seeking foot toward the platform, and felt himself go down into the mucky water. He was stopped at his armpits, as his feet found the earth, the sticky clinging earth. A picture from a book came clear before his eyes. A horse, its front paws and wild nose lifted, its body caught by quicksand.

Only this time he wasn't afraid. He reached both of his hands to Blake, not minding the supplication of the gesture. He kicked and clawed his feet free. He scrambled to the edge of the boat

and across it, to the platform and sat there, sprawled, breathless, muddy and ridiculous, for an unmeasured piece of time.

Then he looked up. Blake stood over him, reaching to the sky. Paul was reminded of how it had been to be three or four years old in a world of grownups.

Blake said, trying to keep the twitch of his lips steady, "I apologize. You pulled grass right good. You hurt?"

Paul shook his head. Suddenly the anger, the fear, were replaced by a bubble of amusement that grew and grew, until he found himself laughing, sitting there on the wet platform of a Godforsaken duck blind and laughing his fool head off. He did not laugh alone. Blake's roars joined with his, and together they filled the crazy place with noise.

Another sound added itself, so that Paul scraped quickly to his feet and his laughter choked in his throat. As far as he could see they rose, blackening the already dark sky, filling the air with the wild, magnificent beat of their wings. Hundreds of them, startled from their hiding places by the man sound, the human sound.

Blake reached for his gun and the water slipped sadly from it. "Wouldn't you know?" he mourned. "Oh, well, if I got a dozen of them we'd never be able to retrieve them."

After a time the birds settled down again, somehow knowing themselves to be safe in their hiding places. Paul reached around inside his jacket to his shirt pocket. His cigarettes were damp but they lit after several tries. He handed Blake one and received in exchange a tin cup of lukewarm coffee. They smoked in silence.

Blake said at last, "I was afraid you'd bust wide open, sitting so still there. Your lips were blue—"

Paul stopped him. "It's all right. I wanted to kill you. It warmed me up." He smiled.

"No call to be ashamed. Men been lost out here three, four days."

"I'm not ashamed."

Blake wrung the water from his cap. "Tide'll turn directly. Coast us back to the farmhouse easy."

Paul said nothing. He was savoring a good feeling.

"Not that it matters, but I ought to tell somebody, I suppose." Blake kept his eyes straight ahead, staring through the reeds. "I haven't had a drink in eighty-six days."

There. Paul took the gift and tucked it carefully away.

It was full dark by the time the tide had taken them smoothly back, by the time the old car spit up excess water and fired itself to action, by the time they rode—the wind still snarling at them, the rain still coming down—back into Marshville.

Paul let Blake off at Bert's. Blake leaned in the window, already so wet that a little more didn't matter. "Had a right smart time," he grinned. "Next trip we'll get birds."

"Next trip, sure," Paul agreed.

He gunned the car around the corner to the small house that held his furniture, his comfort, his pleasure, his wife. He squashed his way upstairs, took a shower, wrapped a robe around him, and in the kitchen poured himself a double portion of straight whisky. Not until he had downed it did he do more than smile in answer to Anne's questioning eyes and words.

"I've been gunning," he said at last, leaning against the sink, watching her easy movements as she lit the oven, sliced bread, and put coffee on. "With a friend of mine."

She turned to him. "I was worried," she said simply. "You weren't at the paper. You weren't anywhere, and nobody had seen you."

She had checked. All day she had wondered.

He put down the small glass. He stretched and yawned. He smiled and moved slowly toward her, ignoring the little flicker that had been in her eyes too long, that had lashed delicately but poisonously at him. He reached out his arms and he pulled her strongly against him.

He said, lips muffled against her hair, "I was somewhere. A long way. And I got back. I'm here. Now. I love you. I want you."

He had never felt so tall, so big, so male before in his life. He knew it. What's more, with a fascinating sort of exultation, he knew that Anne knew it.

It was the beginning of something. He knew that, too. Maybe of being at home in the world. And he owed it to Blake Marcus, himself such a stranger.

Last Friday night Mr. and Mrs. Walter Arrington, of the Pillars, entertained with their annual Christmas open house. The seven-foot three-inch Christmas tree dominated the living room and poured a riot of color over the happy faces of the assembled guests. Marshville society turned out en masse, reinforced by some twenty out-of-town participants. The weather man was good to the hosts, giving them a last minute flurry of snow that settled around the Pillars and turned it into a colored Christmas card. Among those present were... [*Marshville Herald*, January 1]

## 15

Sara's movements were quick and light in spite of her size. She moved from stove to table to shelf to cupboard to breadboard as if the flat arches of her great feet were fitted with springs. Her eyes darted no less fast than her hands, checking, sizing up, searching, and fixing.

Every available bit of space was covered with the broad trays, the large, round circles of silver, the wide, thin plates. They in turn were piled high with delicacies: the smoked turkey, the crimson candied ham, the tiny cream puffs filled with chicken salad, the paste that looked like whipped snow and tasted subtly of the unknown, the little hot beaten biscuits ready to go into the big double ovens, the cheese, the potato chips, the slabs of roast wild duck, the molded salads, gold and green and red.

In the pantry Hennery worked slowly but well. The white of his jacket was a clean contrast to the mulled cider of his skin. His vein-knotted hands moved quietly among the bottles, the fine, delicate glass. His purple lips silently counted out the jig-

gers that went into the half-dozen shakers in a circle on the big tray.

He called to Sara. "Gotta make me room in that old icebox for the julep glasses, child. Don't get frosted, they no good whatever."

"Like you," Sara snapped.

Hennerly put down his work and moved gently toward her. In his hand was a jelly glass. "You just get yourself a load of this you warm your heart toward Hennerly," he coaxed.

Sara sniffed, but she popped a spread ribbon of sandwich into his open mouth, and she stretched her own mouth to the glass he held. The drink curled smokily on her tongue, filled the always sore cavities of her teeth, and slid lovingly down her throat.

Walt's voice came from the door. "Merry Christmas." They jumped wildly apart, and he laughed. "What's mine is yours," he offered, "but how about me?"

Hennerly moved more quickly than usual back to the pantry. He poured a drink as deftly as a bartender and brought it to Walt. "Gotta know it's right, sir," he apologized, grinning. "Gotta sample a swallow."

Sara snorted. "Me, not him," she scorned. "He can't swallow only once. Comes in hundreds, his swallows."

She turned back to her work.

Walt leaned against the cupboard, letting the drink filter into him. Much ado about nothing, these parties. Last year it hadn't seemed that way, or all the years before. But this year the effort involved, even if he didn't do much himself, of trimming the house to look like something out of a magazine, of coming home for weeks beforehand to a rattled, frazzled Margaret and an absent-minded Sara, of thinking of all those people converging, like a mob upon him, was something that annoyed him.

This year, for the first time in his life, he wanted to be let alone. He didn't want to be gracious to the Southern Belles, he didn't want to have a cozy little talk with Miz Maude and discuss the state of the world with Bert. He didn't want to walk



from group to group, seeing that the drinks were fresh, reaching for the right word, the proper gesture, keeping the thing going.

This year he wanted to sit by a small tree and let the firelight touch it. He wanted to have a cup of hot chocolate in his hand and a book on his lap. He wanted to read Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* aloud to somebody who sat still to listen and could hear him no matter how softly he spoke.

He finished the drink impatiently, made himself grin at Sara and Hennery and their anxious faces. "Perfect." He circled his thumb and first finger and walked out.

The dining room, all lace and crystal and silver, had an ornateness that displeased him. The whole setup's like plum cake, he thought disgustedly. So rich it nauseates you. In the back of his mind something smirked at him. Since when have you been so sentimental about Christmas? Since when have you disliked material possessions? You've been angling all your life to acquire just what you have. You've thoroughly enjoyed the sense of power that comes with the finest home in Marshville, the newest car. Brother, simplicity isn't your dish and you know it.

He stood for a time under the mistletoe hung in the center of the wide arch to the living room. He looked up at the tree and knew that he missed Nancy.

It would always seem strange to him that the eager little girl who was his daughter had grown up to be a member of, what did they call it, the international set. Somewhere in London, the foggy city that he'd never seen, Nancy lived in a big house that had been bombed during the war that had touched Marshville so little. Nancy had married a man so wealthy it made Walt's efforts look homespun. Nancy had borne three children who were now in private schools and who spoke with a crisp accent that had put him in his place even six years ago, during the one trip Nancy had made back to her homeland.

He moved restlessly toward the tree and straightened a bulb. Those kids ought to be here now. They ought to be racing through these rooms, upsetting everything and yelling yipee

and kiyi and scam and rat-tat-tat, you're dead. He shrugged. If they were here, most likely they'd curtsy and bow and call him "sir" and sit neatly on the davenport with their ankles together.

He wandered into the study and stood before the fire, looking up. The pictures were in matching frames, but there the resemblance stopped. The left-hand one showed a small box of a building, put together of worn bricks, topped with a small sign, "Arrington Knitting Mills." Next to it was the shot taken last year. The photographer from the city had managed to catch the sprawl, the power, the feeling of efficiency, in the clean lines of the great plant. The sign above it was large and its letters bold.

He went closer and examined the figure in the doorway of each photograph. The first was young, terribly young, it seemed to him now. Walt Arrington, the boy who had placed bricks, one at a time, with only Hennery to help, who had fastened those bricks tightly into place with mortar that would dry solid and lasting and watched the edifice grow. The second figure was more familiar, somebody he seemed to know better. But if there was more assurance in the present Walt Arrington, there wasn't more pride.

He grinned to himself and felt a great deal better. He turned again to the hall. The swish of Margaret's skirts reached down to him and he looked up, watching her.

It was a beautiful gown and it fitted her well. Heavily brocaded, as rich as the silver service, it stood away from her slim waist proudly. She had her hair piled high and it gave her a regalness accented by her lifted chin. Walt knew why she lifted that chin, just as he knew about the strap she pulled out from under her pillow and adjusted with finger tips alone once her light was out. A twitch of pain came and went quickly. It had something to do with the young man in the picture, with Margaret's chin strap, with his loneliness for his daughter and his grandchildren, and with the things a man couldn't, or wouldn't name.

"You look very lovely, my dear," he said. He stretched a hand

to her and she walked the last three steps like a figure in a minuet. The soft lights helped. The wrinkles hid themselves under skillful make-up. "No headache?"

She smiled. "No headache."

He didn't kiss her, and she didn't seem to expect it. Her eyes were clear blue for a change, and what had been in them so much lately was gone. He was glad, without knowing what it was that was gone, nor why it had ever been there.

She said, "It's such a shame Nancy and the children can't share these occasions with us."

He was surprised, but sometimes it was like that with them. As if, not seeing the real world clearly, she saw his thoughts instead.

The chimes rang, and Walt moved to the door. Miz Maude stood there, her flyaway iron-gray hair covered with a crepe de Chine scarf that smelled of the musty drawers of her old home and the giddy twenties. She was flanked by Mrs. Lane, tubby in green satin and an ancient fur coat, and her husband William, the station master, who had never been known to say a word impelled by less than dire necessity, and who would find himself the darkest corner of the least-crowded room and sit there, not even drinking, until Miz Maude pulled him gaily off.

"Don't tell me we're the first?" she chanted now. "No matter how I try to take my time I'm always early. I say to myself I'll really fuss. You know, soak in the tub and brush my hair a hundred strokes. And I do, so help me I do. But somehow I'm always dressed and waiting for honey here, and then we walk as slow as we can—heavens, if we had a car—wouldn't that be awful, we'd be here in time for tea, surely we would. But this gives me a chance to watch it all happen. My, how I do dearly love—"

Walt let it swirl around him, watching Margaret move graciously toward them, hearing her voice tell them the front room for wraps, and thinking how really lucky she was to miss some of the Miz Maudes of the world, to see them mistily, as if by candlelight, all harsh lines erased.

He led William into the study. "How are things going, Wil-

liam?" William nodded his head, as Walt had known he would.

The chimes rang again and again, and the sound of voices came from outside the house. Converging, Walt thought again, a mob building up to a sort of violence just as all mobs did, this one compounded of lust for life instead of death, lust for liquor and flirtation, gossip and celebration.

He excused himself to William and went out into the already crowded hallways. Once he had heard Jenny Young say that men didn't count for much in Marshville. Witch that she was, she had put her finger on it. Even at a party the women seemed to take over, so that it wasn't much different from the drugstore. They lifted their voices in the psalm of themselves while their men stood, rusty and awkward, before the comfort and lubrication of that first drink, nodding and grinning and trying to sound hearty.

He took Margaret's arm, and they walked into the living room. "Let Hennery take over now," he said. "Let's not get into that crush."

It was back in her eyes. "I thought you liked that crush," she said, lightly enough.

He looked carefully. She was afraid of something. There was a cloud of fear in her already clouded eyes. Perhaps there's something to those headaches that Bert hasn't told me. Some hidden worry that she won't share with me.

He bent over and put his lips, oblivious of the people, against her hair. Poor Margaret. Poor, dear, sweet, aging Margaret, who loved a present like a child and warmed to affection like a child, and who didn't know the texture of anything but fine linen in the fabric of her life. For a moment he looked closely at her. Her face lit so radiantly, so suddenly, that he was caught at the edge of a river, in a green place, awkward with the feeling that swept him, with the words that were so hard to say.

A long time ago, he thought, and looked away from her brusquely. His eyes fell directly on Anne Beecham. A hot blush crawled clumsily up his cheeks, as if he had truly been caught, as

if it were a shameful thing to kiss your wife's white hair in public.

But Anne hadn't seen him and the blush cooled. He noted how straight she was, how slim in the white turtleneck jersey and the narrow black evening skirt. As always, he studied for a moment the quiet golden sheen of her hair. Then he turned back to Margaret.

Her head was high. Under her careful blending of rouge and lipstick her skin looked pale, and the intensely bright glance she had just given him was gone. It frightened Walt for a second, then he realized that Margaret's hand was clasping Jenny Young's and he moved closer to her, instinctively protective.

Jenny was saying, ". . . can't seem to get Walt's attention. Of course, in a getup like that Anne Beecham—" Jenny shrugged. "Wouldn't you think she'd get a new dress?"

Margaret said sweetly, "We can't all be fashion plates like you, Jenny."

Jenny ran her hand slowly down over the sequined curve of her hips. "Or you, Margaret," she answered, her voice thick as honey. "That sweet little number must have set Walt back a pretty penny."

But Margaret had shut off her gaze and thus eliminated Jenny. She reached her hand to Bert's, and the gesture alone showed how much she thought of him.

Jenny turned to Walt. "Always thought you were impervious, Walt," she said, so low that even Bert beside her couldn't hear.

Walt smiled. "Not impervious, my dear," he said gently. "Just discriminating."

How she hates to be topped, he thought. None of the women dare to stab her like that, and probably I've made an enemy. But watching her face right now, ugly and misshapen with the fury inside of her, he decided it was worth it.

Jenny's voice shook, but she kept it down, "I just thought it was friendly to warn you. Those Tuesday nights—"

Walt took a deep breath and leaned past Jenny to Bert. "Do you suppose," he asked, calm as marble outside, "that you and

I could cut this formality and get the drinks rolling? Ourselves, first, of course."

His arm looped over Bert's thin shoulders and the two of them headed toward Henner's pantry. Bert could hardly know that the thick muscles lying tensely against his neck were struggling against the outrageous impulse to strike a woman.

He said, "No heavy stuff for me tonight, Walt. Touch of champagne, maybe."

Walt made himself grin. "You and Blake both?"

"He's doing a good job of it, isn't he?" Bert turned toward Walt, stopping them both beneath the stairs. "He's writing a book, too. Half done, he tells me. Only don't mention it. He's funny about it. Shares it only with Paul Beecham and then just in small dribbles."

Walt felt glad and said so. "Outside of you, I don't know a person I'd rather see serene and happy than Blake."

Bert said, "Easy, boy. I'm happy."

"Yeah," Walt agreed. "Sure. Everybody's happy. Let's have that drink."

The hours went along. Part of them Walt spent trying to figure out his own acute discomfort. The truth that might lie hidden in Jenny's knifing. The expression on Margaret's face when she saw him looking at Anne. If it did get back to Margaret, what would there be to tell? That he had walked home with Anne Beecham, first to Mrs. Lane's, then to the small house of his own youth, a handful of times.

Well, more than that, maybe. Sometimes they had walked in silence to the end of the village and back again. But more often, wonderfully more often, with words pulsing out of them in a sort of race.

Until that Tuesday, that Tuesday after which Anne didn't come to the library any more.

In a pool of quiet next to William, Walt sat down and let that last Tuesday paint itself against the great stone of the

walk-in fireplace in the study. William was a good person to sit beside, to hunt with, to fish with. William was his own man somehow, tucked inside himself where his nervous wife could never go, where she could beat her hands and her heart until they were raw and never, never touch him. Which was, Walt perceived suddenly, the reason for her nervousness, for the words that filled the air around her, for the way she carried her own confusion with her. To each of us, he thought, our own protection.

It was three weeks ago tonight. He waited for Anne at the corner, knowing that she would come out alone, after all the rest of them had left, when only Martha Evans remained to tally up, to turn down the creaking furnace, to pull the old lights to darkness.

When Anne came toward him, he reached for her arm, the only touch he allowed himself, the only touch, he knew, that she would ever allow. They turned from habit away from the main street, down South Street, even in winter so thickly treed that branches cut off the dim street lights and gave them a sort of secret tunnel in which to walk.

The air was not cold, rather just the echo of cold remained. It felt good on his cheeks and in his lungs in the same way that Anne's footsteps beside his sounded right. Fresh and promising and companionable.

At the end of the block Anne spoke for the first time. "I'm giving up literature, Walt," she said lightly. "I'm going in for home magazines and women's shopping sections and maybe a touch of the weeklies. But no more books."

He missed a step, hopped back to meet her stride, and asked, keeping it casual, "You getting too much book-larnin'?"

He could just make out her smile, her nod. After a time she said, dreamily, like that first night, "I like this Marshville, Walt. Paul loves it. He's more content than I've ever seen him."

Walt said impatiently, "I know, I know. It's obvious. He's doing a good job."

"It isn't that alone," Anne went on slowly. "But something

pretty important has happened to him. A sort of crystallizing—”

Walt burst out, “Are we going to psychoanalyze your husband? Is that it?”

Anne took a deep breath. “No, no, of course not.” She pulled up the collar of her heavy old coat and looked straight ahead. “We’re not going to psychoanalyze anybody, Walt. Not you, nor me, nor Paul. Not the town. I like it the way it is. Seeing and not touching. That’s growing up. Children always want to touch. When you can look and not touch—”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do. But maybe not. It’s hard to say it. To say anything that matters much any more. But it’s good, too. Good not to feel anything—hurt or—”

Walt stopped. He put his hands on her shoulders and swung her around. Even in his intensity he noticed that they were beyond the last house.

He said, “Anne.”

She didn’t try to pull away. She stared at him calmly, her face lifted in those etched lines that had drawn him so in the garden. Only now there was nothing in her eyes, except a certain cool friendliness.

“So that’s the way you’ve solved it,” he said. “The thing that was eating at you when you came here. By going away with it. By padding yourself—”

For a moment her eyes closed. When she opened them they were candid and level. “The trouble is—I’ve lost the most important thing of all.”

Walt let go of her shoulders. “What is most important, Anne?”

“Tenderness. I can’t feel tenderness anywhere.”

Walt asked softly, “For no one? Not even for little children?”

She shook her head. “More than all else—not for babies, not for children. Walt, can you dream what love is—without tenderness?”

He thought, the padding is pretty thin. Thinner than she



knows. "I know all about tenderness," he said, "without love."

"Can that be?"

"It can. A sort of kindness. A kind of pity. It's more subtle, more demanding, than love. Its roots are very fine and they wind all around and cling and tie—like steel threads."

Anne whispered, "I miss them, those threads."

Walt cleared his throat. "Anne," he asked hesitantly, "for me? No tenderness?"

"Don't ask me, Walt."

"What then?"

"Please, Walt."

"It has to be something. These Tuesday nights. These weeks and months—since August, Anne. It has to be something."

"It is something."

"Tell me, dear."

"We've found words for so many things. There's been such a—an exploration, Walt." She rubbed one hand against her cheek. "You know when friends of mine die, I never can put words on paper to comfort those left behind. I love words, they come to me easily. But I've learned to erase them all—with everybody. Except you, Walt, these months. I've talked to you. I've saved all my talk for you."

"And now, you want to erase those times with me, is that it? You want to shut up the last corner and close yourself in—"

She went on as if she hadn't heard him. "For some things there aren't any words. For real sympathy." She faced him squarely. "For—for this."

It was a long time, Walt thought, a long time since his heart had rushed like this. He asked, "Love? Could you say love?"

Anne put her hand over his, a first gesture. "When I was very young," she said almost to herself, "I was so packed with all of it. There was a well—and—it was deep and clear—"

Walt whispered, "Great God in Heaven."

"And it was all for one, you know. All for Paul—" She took her hand back and covered her face.

Walt wanted to cry. He wanted to bawl out loud, like a kid. "Anne," he muttered. "Oh, Anne."

She lifted her head. There were no tears in her eyes. "Oh, please, Walt," she said quickly, "don't think I'm unhappy now. I'm not. I doubt if I ever will be again."

For the first time Walt felt wise with his years. What a pitiful final promise.

"But I know somehow that I would be, Walt. I would be unhappy if we—how do they say it here—walk out together any more. I—I feel far away, detached—like I told you. But I know that Margaret is a wonderful person and that she is my friend. I know that Paul—" She swallowed. "Paul could be hurt."

She swung around and headed back toward town. Walt followed beside her, wanting to say he didn't know what, and finding no way to begin.

"Once," Anne went on, very calm now, "I wanted to hurt Paul. Back there when I felt so much, I wanted to make him feel, too." She shook her head. "I don't any more. I wish nobody any hurt—and nobody much good. Not even myself, Walt. Not—not even you."

There should be some way to blast through this, Walt told himself. In time. A great many things take only time.

He said gently, "You've ripped yourself apart somehow, my dear. And you've managed to sew yourself up again. Which is a fine thing and a brave one. Only"—he made himself smile—"the seams are a little crooked."

She smiled too. "But the garment fits, my friend. And it's very comfortable. Light—and durable."

She stopped at the corner. She put out her hand and laid it in his. "Thank you, Walt. Marshville is a very small place and I'll be seeing you a lot. But not alone again, Walt. Please."

She turned and walked the half block to her home. Walt watched her figure grow smaller, watched the front door toss out a panel of light as she opened it, and then the light was gone and the door closed.

He sighed deeply and walked slowly toward the center of town, toward the Pillars. Blake Marcus's lights showed on the third floor of Bert Young's home. He saw through the window that Paul Beecham was bent over the old desk at the *Herald*. He passed a tall, thin figure, and realized later that he hadn't spoken to Martha Evans.

When he came to his own front door, he stood for a long time looking up at the black outlines. This time they didn't just tower over him. They seemed to threaten him, to lean forward so sharply to crush him, that he unlocked the door hurriedly and went inside where he would be safe.

...Dr. Young's Gram was the belle of the ball in a purple dress that set off her white hair. Mrs. Bert Young wore black sequins, very daring and in high fashion. As for the hostess... ["Playful Prattle," *Marshville Herald*, January 8]

## 16

A thing that Bert Young liked to do at parties, a thing that rested him, was to sit someplace near the center of events, not close enough to be bumped into or climbed over, but near enough to hear snatches. Maybe it was listening to people when they were sick that made a fragment of speech tell a lot. When there is no strength to spare, the words are few, but the inflection, the expression in the eyes, can hold a lifetime's shaping.

Lord knows, there were more than bits of talk going on around here. There were torrents of it, rivers and pools and rapids. Put all together it sounded mad, with an insanity of ego and a wild shrillness that increased as Hennery shuffled quietly from group to group, replenishing the glasses. But if you concentrated hard enough, watching one person steadily, his voice or hers would come clear through the jumble. He remembered Gram used to say, after she took in Blake and him, that when they were out playing with a group of small boys she could always find their voices, even though others yelled above them. Bert focused on Miz Maude, then turned quickly away before he could hear her. It was enough that her liver was bad and that he sat through her semimonthly appointments looking sympathetic.

He shook his head as Hennery leaned toward him and asked, "Zeke making out okay?"

Hennery nodded, his old eyes lighting up. "He wife gonna

git another baby come next month," he cackled. "Good thing, bein' young. Startin' over don't hurt none."

"She hasn't been to me."

Hennery looked abashed. "Nossir, I told her it was ungrateful. But she said you busy and she don't want to bother you till time."

"You tell her to come around."

Hennery nodded. "They 'preciate though. That house you find 'em. No fires there."

"I hope not. Anything catches fire in Marshville, it burns to the ground."

Hennery laughed, caught himself, glanced about him, and went on.

"Why do you take them?" A hundred times, a thousand, Jenny had been after him. "People know you mess around with them—"

That was once he told her off. Told her some colored people were better than some white trash. By far. By a long, long way.

He found her, as he knew he would, as he knew he meant to. He watched the others, pretending that he didn't care where Jenny was, under the table or off in the garden with a new man, he didn't care, he didn't give a hoot, not a damn. But he found her.

She was beside the Christmas tree, looking up. What she looked up to was not the star at the top or the sparkling ornaments. She looked up, with that tilt of her neck that meant she was angled toward a male. Not only her neck, he thought sardonically, her whole body arched gracefully, toward and yet away from the tall man in the dinner jacket. Somebody from the city, most likely, somebody used to beautiful proffering women, but not averse to one more. She'd be trying to impress him with her sophistication, make him believe that it was just a terrible accident of fate which had put her here in this hick village.

She was saying, ". . . think I'll die if I don't get out of here. I come to the city sometimes. Maybe we could—lunch—together . . ."

She doesn't care who hears her, Bert thought wearily. He got up and walked over to Gram's corner.

She smiled at him. "The Arringtons give the nicest parties ever, don't they, Bert?" Her champagne glass was still half full, and how would she know about parties, having been to so few? He lifted one of her sad hands and patted it.

"Jenny never looked prettier," Gram went on. He saw that she meant it.

He said, "The tree lights are soft. They cover a lot."

Paul Beecham came to stand beside them. He grinned at Gram. "How's my girl?"

She beamed.

"How long has this been going on?" Bert inquired.

Paul said, "Since the day she brought me the news of the Sunshine Sewing Circle, and I realized there was a pure diamond in our midst."

Everybody smiled at everybody.

It was good, Bert thought, wandering off again, to see Paul Beecham find himself and his place. Some men take a long time to grow up. But once they do, it's as if all the things they had stored inside of them came spilling out and they were friendly and at ease forevermore.

It hadn't been easy to take, the way Jerry attached himself to Paul, the way Paul persuaded him to go away to school, somehow giving him faith enough to try.

Jerry said, "Dad, if Mr. Beecham thinks I've got what it takes—gee, he's taught journalism—he says I've got a real style— He ought to know."

Oh, well, you have no right to plan things for your son, like medical school, and steps up and away from his father, and being the doctor his old man had been too busy doctoring to be.

If I'd never met Jenny, Bert thought, if I hadn't needed her so much that it twisted everything except the simplicities of this community right out of me. But it wasn't Jenny. Not fair to blame

her for that, too. If a man's supposed to be a success no woman stands in his way.

He wandered into the dining room. People stood in clusters, holding piled plates, like brides' bouquets, stiffly in front of them. Sara stood at one end of the table, managing to serve fractious salads, pour coffee, and refill the great trays without losing a bit of her dignity and aura of pride.

Bert held out an empty plate. "You've outdone yourself this time," he told her.

She smiled at him, for once absent-minded and brusque. "Mr. Walt, he's over there in the corner with Mrs. Beecham should you want to eat with pleasant folks," she offered.

Bert kept his eyes carefully on his feet and heaved a sigh of relief when he managed to reach Walt and found a wall to lean against.

"Never did like to eat in bed, on my lap, or by hand," he said to them.

There was something very still there, something held taut and alone, secret from the rest of them. . . .

"Talk about me," Jenny had stormed a while back. "Marshville gives me the knife, does it? Then why doesn't it sharpen its claws on that tart Anne Beecham, and lash out at your precious Walt? But he's beyond sin, isn't he? Yeah, yeah. Above suspicion. Well, she ain't—isn't. And what do they do every Tuesday night? Where do they go? Tell me that, will you?"

"Trouble with you, Jenny," he answered calmly, "is you're jealous. Walt never lit up for you the way some of the weaker ones do."

She glared at him. "What's more," she went on furiously, "I'm going to lick the tar out of Sally if she doesn't stop going over to the Beechams'—hanging around Anne like she was something special, like Walt does—"

Bert said, "You're not going to touch Sally. Maybe the kid needs a little kindness. And a place to go to get away from run-

ning the streets all the time. Only kid I see on the streets as much as my own daughter is that kid of Bess Marr's—"

"Now what do you mean by that?" Jenny stood still and anchored her hands on her hips.

"Everybody knows Bess trains the kid to stay away. Gives her a quarter every time she has a caller—"

"Why you—" Jenny gasped. "You mean I—I pay Sally to get out—"

"Calm down, my dear," Bert said quietly. "You read too much into my words. If the shoe fits—" he shrugged.

Sometimes it was almost fun, this baiting and parrying. Sometimes. At others it left him, alone in his office, alone in his bedroom, shaking and weak, with that pain in him, and with a residue of regret. Not regret for besting Jenny. Regret that it had deteriorated into this, the only contact they had, the only mood they shared.

Jenny screamed, "Let her get her own kid then. If Paul isn't able, Walt will oblige."

It took him a moment to control himself. "I know it's impossible for you to comprehend it, my dear wife, but there are some women who don't go in for that sort of thing."

It made him wonder now, though. Ten years Paul said they had been married. And she had a way with kids. Sally talked about her at night sometimes.

It was a secret between Bert and his young daughter, their good nights. No matter what time Bert came home he went into Sally's room. The seven-year-old looked lost and lonely in the big bed, somehow pathetic and orphaned. When Bert sat down and reached a hand toward her, she woke instantly, conditioned to this good time, the best of the day, when she and her father could be together.

So it was one night that she said, "She gives us parties, Mrs. Beecham does. She sets a table for us in front of the fire and she makes hot chocolate and even sandwiches. There's always cookies, too."



"Us?" Bert asked, pushing back the hair that needed curling, that needed a mother to remind the barber to trim it even at the sides.

"Me and Joanne Marr."

"Joanne Marr and I," Bert corrected and then repeated, "Joanne Marr?"

Sally spoke wisely, as she sometimes did. "Don't you speak against her, Dad. She's a pretty girl and nice."

Bert nodded. "Of course," he agreed. "I only wondered how Mrs. Beecham knew her."

"Joanne fell down one day. Mrs. Beecham came running, you bet, and fixed it—and we go there."

As simple as that. . . .

Now, watching Anne Beecham, tall and quiet, only her eyes moving restlessly from person to person, he wondered why it should be Bess Marr's kid, and his own, who benefited from what she had to give.

He heard Walt take a deep breath. Walt's voice sounded rusty. "If you'll excuse me, I'd better circulate."

Anne said, "The Southern Belles are simply pantin' around corners lookin' for you, honey man."

They laughed, and Bert added, "Not to mention Mrs. Lane. Where's Margaret?"

Walt looked startled. "In the other rooms somewhere, I suppose. Why?"

Bert said, "No reason. I just missed her. Haven't seen her for a while."

It must be this way with Margaret. She must look from one to the other and try with her bad eyes to make out the expressions that would give her the key. Or didn't she care? It was hard to tell with a woman like Margaret. Always pleasant and gracious, a little arrogant, a little regal, sure of her position. And yet those headaches, with no physical cause.

Walt moved away. Bert watched him. He swung suddenly to Anne. "Come see me some day," he suggested. "On business."

Her eyes were questioning. "Do I look sick? Is there some terrible thing wrong with me that is noticeable only to the trained eyes of a doctor?"

"Why do you have Sally and the little Marr girl for parties? Do you like children?"

The question went out of her eyes. "As well as anybody," she shrugged. "Better than grownups and a little less than dogs."

He laughed shortly. "Don't try to make me think you're hard, lassie. Or cold."

"Think what you like."

"You sound like Jenny," he mused. "It doesn't become you."

"It doesn't even become Jenny."

"Sometimes," Bert went on, staring ahead of him, "a doctor sees a woman who is a born mother. Who has the physical characteristics for childbirth, and the mental ability to raise a child the way it should go. Not to mention the heart. It always gives him sort of a pang to see those characteristics unrealized. Whether because of lack of desire or—"

Her plate trembled. "What do you know about it?" she asked sharply.

"Not much," Bert said meekly, "but you've got to give me credit for trying to learn."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Will you leave me alone if I tell you that there have been two times—when—when—"

He put out his free hand and steadied her plate. "I thought so. But sometimes it's the third time that does the trick." He grinned at her impudently. After a long breath she smiled weakly back.

"You come see me?" he suggested again.

She shook her head. "I want no more of it," she said firmly. "No more of any of it."

"You can't substitute other people's children—" he began.

"My dear Doctor Young," she said, "I wouldn't consider it. I am no tender, aching bundle of thwarted mother love. I had

my chances and I flunked the course. Now I'm taking another degree. It's a snap and I like it."

She moved from his side, put her plate on the table, and threaded her way from the room.

Bert thought, What a joy it would be to put a baby in her arms. To see all that self-induced marble melt right away. It's the kind of thing that makes this business bearable. Babies. The repeating miracle. To make it possible for a woman like that to have her child—

Sara whispered at his side, "Doc, sir, you come upstairs, huh? My lady lying there and she don't even moan with the headache. Just lie there and stare up and up and won't give me no word—"

Margaret's careful hairdo was pulled wildly to her shoulders. Her dress was crumpled from her tossing. Her eyes were antagonistic, lighting on him, as Anne's had been.

This is certainly my unpopular night with women, Bert thought. He leaned over her. "Where do you keep your pills?"

She said flatly, "I don't want any. If I have a pain in my head it's something to take up my mind."

He rubbed her forehead gently, feeling her wince away. "A bad one?"

"I think," she went on, still not looking at him, "that I shall dispense with your services, Bert. Sometimes I believe that you and Jenny work together. She tears people down so they have to go to you to be built up."

Bert smiled. "If I were a psychiatrist"—he reached for Margaret's wrist—"there might be some truth in your accusation. God knows Jenny is an expert at bringing on the nervous breakdown."

Margaret sat up and swung her gold slippers over the side of the bed. "Well, she's not going to give me one," she said decisively. She stood up and smoothed her dress, then walked to the mirror and made up her mouth and fixed her hair.

Bert sat back quietly and watched her.

"Did you ever stop to think," he said at last, "that maybe

something could be done about your eyes? And those headaches? Maybe they don't have to get progressively worse. Just maybe."

He grinned to himself. God's little helper. Going from woman to woman, promising miracles. Just see Doc Young. He'll answer your prayers.

But Margaret didn't look like she had a prayer answered. Her face turned toward his, white, etched sharp at the edges.

"What is it?" he asked her.

She shook her head wordlessly. "I thought you said there might be a chance to do something about my eyes," she whispered.

He shrugged. "I really don't know, Margaret," he admitted. "You only told me what the specialist said. We've never really gone into it—"

She slid her tongue around her freshly rouged lips. "He said it was hopeless. No use trying. That it probably wouldn't get—total—"

"How long ago?"

"Eight—almost nine years—"

"There are improvements in every trade in that length of time—" He stood up, moving close to her. "There's a man in Baltimore. I'll make an appointment—"

She shook her head. "Let me think about it—"

"Would it straighten things out for you, Margaret? Would it make you happy?"

Her expression was both frightened and evasive. "Straighten what out?" she asked coolly. "I'm perfectly happy. Why shouldn't I be?" Her glance was shrewd. "Do you know of any reason why I shouldn't be?"

He shook his head.

She moved her shoulders. "Then let's get downstairs." She laughed, the top note flattening. "Heavens, they'll be saying all sorts of things about us if we stay here any longer."

She went ahead of him, erect and wrapped in herself.

Bert followed. It would be interesting to make a notebook,

he thought, like a case history, on each one of them. Friends, acquaintances, and patients. What they needed. What they were searching for. What was keeping them from the discovery of themselves.

But of course, he wouldn't be anywhere near right. He wouldn't know. About Jenny, or Jerry, or Margaret, or Walt, or Anne, or Paul.

Or Bert, he thought, taking Margaret's arm at the top of the wide sweep of stairs, looking down at the hubbub of color and sound below him. He didn't even know what Bert Young, M.D., wanted. If anything.

Bess Marr, who lives upstairs over the paper store, was rushed to Fairmount Hospital last Friday morning by ambulance. Miss Marr received multiple bruises, contusions, and a broken nose at the hands of an unknown assailant. [*Marshville Herald*, April 2]

## 17

Mommy said, over and over, "Never had so much snuff and tobacco business in my whole life."

Poppy mourned, "Poor girl, poor girl."

Mommy sniffed. "Poor, my foot. She's been a-askin' for some such knockin' around all her life. Why this town put up with her bein' here, I'll never reckon."

Poppy didn't answer that. He never answered mean remarks. The words that came from his lips were hard won, sparse as his old body, and sieved through the gentleness of his heart. He watched the flutterings of the Southern Belles as they leaned across the counter, the sausage curls bouncing, their heavily painted mouths turned to ovals of eagerness.

"I declare," Sue Lee cried, "I never did suspect such a thing. Me, in my innocence, passing her on the street—"

"Sometimes even giving her the time of day," Sally Mae added.

"And never rightly knowing she was a bad woman!"

They leaned back simultaneously on their high, run-down heels and shook their heads in horror.

Mommy looked around her and pride tickled against the back of her throat. This crowd was the sort of thing she had so brightly hoped for when she and Poppy had first started the store. But it didn't work out that way, what with George Smith being left

enough money to start a drugstore, and the town ladies just naturally making it their meeting place.

This was a moment, all right. They were all here, their eyes bugged out to get the story she was telling. Even Jenny Young leaned against the front counter, flipping the pages of a magazine, trying to pretend her ears weren't flapping. Mommy sniffed. Show me the difference, except for the fancy clothes.

Margaret Arrington asked, "Didn't you hear anything, Mommy?"

Poppy leaned close to Margaret. He liked her best of all. Quiet and good, he told himself, and always with a smile for the whole town, black and white alike.

"It happened when we was at home," he said, carefully twisting his mouth around the words and sharpening his soft voice. "Come morning we heard moaning. Something fierce, it was. Mommy said, 'Something's wrong.' I went upstairs and knocked on the door and the little one come."

He stopped, remembering the look on Joanne's pinched face under the rough hair.

Jenny spoke up keenly. There was a damp look to her lips, small high lights of eagerness, as she ran her tongue quickly around them. "Where was she? What did she look like?"

Poppy glanced quickly at her, then turned away. He walked through the narrow back door and sat down on a soft-drink case. He had said all he could.

Back in the store Mommy took up the tale gladly. "He was gone so long I got myself itchy. I looked out, and Mr. Beecham was a-walkin' by to his paper. I yelled at him, and in he come and up he went and down he ran and come the ambulance from Fairmount. They brought her down on a stretcher, Mr. Beecham and the ambulance lady. Mrs. Beecham she come along about then because he called her and told her to and in they put Bess—" She took a deep breath. "And Mrs. Beecham she climbed right into the back of the ambulance with her." She waited for a gasp. It was something, all right, and surely they all saw it. Mrs.

Beecham with her quiet ways and high and mighty chin, sitting that close to the battered body of bad Bess.

Margaret said, "That was like her."

Jenny said, "Sure was." Double meaning edged the two words. There was an uncomfortable silence.

Margaret stirred. "I think I'll go see Anne." She swallowed as if it took a bit of doing.

Jenny spoke up. "I'll go along with you."

Margaret pretended not to hear her. She turned around and walked out of the store. Although she couldn't see Jenny, she knew she was behind her and was unsurprised to see the high, narrow feet pacing beside hers.

"Here comes Miz Maude," Jenny said loudly. "Like a hound-dog on a scent."

Margaret muttered, "Shhh."

"I heard you," Miz Maude called. "There's only one real hound-dog in this town. Female, that is."

Margaret tried not to laugh aloud. Miz Maude grinned.

"I just been to Anne's," she rattled. "Poor lamb, what an awful experience for her. All bruised, Bess was. Mouth swollen ten times its size, and holding Anne's hand and wanting to talk." She shuddered dramatically. "Anne's so refined, it's a wonder she's not prostrated."

Jenny snorted.

"Should have been you," Miz Maude for once spoke slowly, for once focused straight. "Nothing Bess had to say would surprise you, would it, Jenny?" She walked off, looking pleased with herself.

The fury climbed quickly in Jenny. Words knotted in her throat. Even Miz Maude, she thought. Even that rattlebrain took it on herself to condescend. She glanced at Margaret. The amusement still rode Margaret's mouth and put a sort of lilt into her steps.

Jenny said loudly, "You and Bert had quite a session in his



office the other day. If he weren't so tired, and you weren't so old, I might get ideas."

The amusement deepened. It even managed to crawl shyly into Margaret's voice. "Bert's not as tired as you think, Jenny," she teased. "And I'm not so very much older than you."

"You've got grandchildren," Jenny said sharply.

"You've got Jerry," Margaret echoed.

"I was married very young," Jenny went on furiously. "You know that. Bert grabbed me before I knew what it was all about—"

Margaret laughed. "You were born knowing what it was all about. I myself was only eighteen when I carried Nancy up those steps the first time—" She made a gesture toward the small house.

Then she stopped, staring at the house. "I don't think I want to go now. Later—I just remembered—that is—my head—"

She swung around and started back toward town.

Jenny watched her go, the straight back, the composure adding fire to that already blazing in her. She turned and looked toward Anne's house, and the desire to torment the cool blond woman left her suddenly.

It wasn't that desire which rode her, anyhow. The desire that tried to turn itself to anger was an older one, and more familiar. It started with the knowledge that a man had beaten Bess Marr half to death. It grew in pictures of the brutal wooing and what must have preceded it. If they hadn't walked into Pop's shanty that far day, maybe Joe would have taught her some of the things that Bess Marr knew now.

She shivered and turned toward home, walking slowly, not able to think clearly. She wished desperately that she were in the city, anywhere, anywhere where there was a hotel, where there was a man, a rough, brutal—

She looked up to her own front door where Blake stood above her, ready to leave. He seemed tall that way, and strong with

the color that was new in his cheeks, the sharp outline which had come to his face these past few months.

"Blake," she whispered urgently. Her throat was dry. She walked up the steps close to him. "Blake," she repeated, "did you hear about Bess Marr?"

He nodded. His eyes were as blue as they used to be, and she could feel the warmth of his breath reach out to her. "Poor kid," he said, as Poppy had said.

"Poor kid," Jenny repeated vaguely. Blake didn't smell of liquor any more. He smelled of pipe tobacco and shaving lotion. She leaned closer. "I want to talk to you, Blake," she said, still in a whisper.

He shook his head. "I'm on my way to town."

She reached one hand to his, hanging at his side. She moved her fingers around and between his, lacing them together. Slowly, subtly, she increased their pressure. Slowly, subtly, the anger in her curled into sweetness, into matching pressure, until she felt it press against her chest, her throat, and out into her eyes for Blake to see.

He saw it, all right. The pupils of his own eyes turned dark, and he pulled strongly against her hand.

Jenny moved inches toward him. She cried, "Come inside. Blake, come with me."

He shook his head, but slowly this time.

"I have to talk to you," she found herself saying quickly. "We haven't talked in so long—"

"We never have talked." Blake's voice had a slight thickness, the same thickness she used to notice after the first drink that was never enough.

"Blake," she cried sharply, then quickly changed her tone. "Just for a moment," she begged. "It's important, honest."

He stared deeply at her and drew a long, uneven breath. "I—" he began. He stopped. "Jenny—" he started.

She slid her arm under his coat and moved him, heavy but unresisting, beside her through the door. She closed it, turned

to him and felt the fine relief of rare laughter come up through her. "You can't give up everything, can you?" she asked lightly. "Isn't it enough to be on the wagon with liquor?"

She pulled the shoulders of his coat down his arms. She let the heavy thing fall on the floor. She reached for the buttons of his jacket, undid them quickly, and stretched her arms around his waist, searching frantically beneath his shirt for the warm taut feeling of human skin. It put her close to him, tight and close, from lips to breast to thigh to toe. She clung and waited, hearing the sound of her breath, light and rapid in her ears. Hearing, too, at last, at last, at last, the heavy, torn, rich momentum of Blake's breathing. Feeling at last, oh, heaven, at last, the grab and pull and tear of his arms, until her own hold was a delicate thing compared to the crush of them, the writhing, wonderful, monstrous force that was tearing at her, inside and out.

Locked together, breaths sobbing, feet hurrying, awkward with their mouths together, they moved across Jenny's living room, up the shallow stairs to the second floor, around the turn and up the steeper flight to Blake's room. For an exultant exhausted moment they leaned against the door. Jenny released one hand reluctantly and twisted the key in the lock. Its tiny sound was lost to her as she turned again to Blake.

Ah, it was good. It was all the fury turned right. It was the answer. "Blake," she muttered. "Blake."

He whispered, "Don't talk. I hate you when you talk."

She dug her fingers into his hair. "Bess Marr," she managed to gasp, "he beat her, Blake."

Blake shook his head. He pushed her chin back roughly and pushed his lips, full and searching, on hers.

Jenny broke his hold a little. "Hurt me, Blake," she begged. It was suddenly wildly, terribly necessary. "Hit me. Beat me." She felt her lips drag into a smile. "Where it doesn't show, of course."

She waited, and it was as if needles pricked against her skin, everywhere. It was pure glory, the moment of waiting for a

man's heavy hand to crash against her, again and again and again, to be followed by the glorious crash of a man's heavy body, the heat beyond heat and the blaze beyond burning.

She opened her eyes. Blake's face was wild with her request. His arm was lifted and his body tensed with the muscles coiled and ready. The gray-haired man in the hotel, the drummer in the bar, even Joe back there in the shanty—they faded away against the sight of Blake. I've done this to him, Jenny thought joyously. It was there all the time and now it's mine. He's mine and I won't have to hunt, I won't have to wait—

In horror she watched the reason come slowly back into Blake's eyes. She saw his uplifted arm slip slowly, slowly down through the weighted air.

She reached for him. "Please," she begged, the word strangely fitted to her demanding mouth. "Please, Blake. Please, darling."

He disentangled himself. His whole body was shaking. With trembling hands he smoothed his clothes and his hair. He sucked in deep breaths, like a diver too long under water.

When he spoke his voice was thin and dull, as if he could not hear its sound above the roaring in his ears. "God help me," he said quietly. "I love you, and you're a monster." He laughed shortly and pushed her gently into the nearest chair. "I thought I could exorcise you—like a ghost, you know?" He sounded friendly and uncaring. "So I put you down on paper. All of you. Each last little damned and dirty thing. Each bit of excitement—" He stopped and reached for his cigarettes. "But I didn't go far enough, Jenny. I didn't guess it this far."

She tried to get up. She was too weak with the disappointment, the sudden reversal of her body's tensions. "Blake," she murmured softly, "come here."

He shook his head, and this time it was a sad, final shake. "Not again, my girl. Not ever again." He shuddered. "I need a drink." He raised one eyebrow. "The lesser of two evils." He moved toward the door, turned the key.

This time Jenny heard the small sound.

He faced her. "Damn you," he said, almost casually. "Don't you ever come near me again. If you do, I'll do more than beat you. I'll kill you."

The door shut very gently, as if after a polite caller.

Jenny closed her eyes. Tears raged behind her lids, but they burned themselves up before they could fall. She sat very still, letting the clamor of her body silence itself. Letting herself grow empty and lax.

When the shaking stopped, when the emptiness was complete, she filled it, slowly and deliberately, with a poison that was heavy-moving and cold.

"Damn me?" she whispered at last. "Damn him." She rose slowly and moved toward Blake's desk. Carefully, thoroughly, she began to search for the papers of his manuscript. "I'll fix him," she said aloud. "I'll fix him good."

Jacob Zfitales, Fairmount cab driver, was arrested Monday and remanded to Fairmont County Jail on charges of assault with intent to commit bodily harm in the case of Miss Bess Marr. [*Marshville Herald*, April 2]

## 18

The morning of Bess Marr's tragedy, Paul Beecham walked toward the *Herald* office, whistling a little under his breath. His mind, he told himself, was getting to resemble a filing case. Not a very neat one, but at least he kept things in alphabetical and chronological order, and if they got out of place sometimes, he knew where to find them.

The spring sun was shy as a girl's fingers against him, like Anne's fingers those days of their courting, when she had first set them on his mussed hair, smoothing it back from his forehead, saying, "I've wanted to do that since the day we met."

The drawer of Anne, he told himself, is the bottom one, the deep one, the one that is least neat. But the one which supports all the other drawers of my mind. Someday we'll sort it out together. For now it's enough that it's still there.

Halfway down the block he read out the sign of the *Marshville Herald*, and the ripple of pleasure that it gave him added to the content of the morning.

"I'm getting it under my belt," he thought. "That last editorial caused a lot of comment, and the town beautification idea is my own. They stop me now to give me news, even the farmers on Saturday night."

It was a good feeling and it carried him quickly past the stores that were still closed. It almost carried him past the paper store. But Mommy changed that. Her old hand clutched on his arm

and her shrill voice clutched too. "He went up a good time ago," she cried. "Such moaning. I ain't got the nerve to foller him. You go, Mr. Beecham."

Paul pulled his mind close. "Where?"

"Upstairs. That Bess Marr. She's sure dyin' the noise she's makin', and Poppy, he went to see. Him with his bad health—ain't heard a sound—"

Paul walked through the narrow, dusty doorway beside the store. The stairs were steep, curving, and narrow, and they seemed to be filled with darkness and a slow evil smell. This is a place that should be cleaned from the town, he thought. It's a thing for the paper to do, I suppose. But Bess Marr is such a thin little thing. She scurries so, up and down these stairs, in and out of the stores just before closing time. Like a shamed, scared mouse. If she went somewhere else, it could be worse for the kid. Here people have a decent word for her, a cooky, a pat, no matter what they say of Bess.

The gray door at the head of the stairs was open. Standing beside it, chin on chest, was Joanne.

Paul knelt to face her. "Is your Mama sick?"

The child's eyes turned up to him. They were pale gray and hard as marbles, with a flickering, sharp light behind them, like aggies. "Naw," she said. "She's black and blue and beat up by that goddam mean old Jake."

Paul felt winded, as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Where were you when it happened?" He reached out his hand to her slowly, as to a strange dog.

"Sleeping," she said, her eyes once more on the dirty floor. "I coulda kicked him or something. But I slept like dead."

Paul stood up. He handed her a quarter. "You go down and ask Mommy to give you a bottle of milk for breakfast," he ordered.

The child stared dully at the money in his palm. "I don't want no quarter," she refused. "Mama gave me quarters. No quarter."

How much does she know, at six? Paul changed the quarter to a dime and tucked it in her hand.

"I don't want no breakfast," she insisted. "I gotta stay with Mama."

Paul didn't argue. He stepped around Joanne and walked into the tiny bedroom. There was only one clear space in its violence, and that space was filled with still more violence. Bess Marr lay on the one piece of floor that wasn't disturbed by the battle that had taken place. Poppy was on his knees beside her. His eyes were closed and he looked as if he were praying.

Maybe he is, Paul thought, stepping up beside the small aching bones, the thin bruised flesh, the wild hair, that was the town's bad woman. It was enough to make an infidel think to his sins.

Poppy looked up. "She don't move," he said softly. "She don't hardly answer. Just moans."

Paul leaned over. He lifted the limp hand. The pulse moved sadly, like a faint sigh, through the thin wrist. "Get downstairs and call Bert," he commanded. Poppy rose slowly, straightening out his joints.

"She ain't much," he said, "but nobody deserves such handling as this." He went out.

Paul pushed back the dark hair from the low forehead. "Bess," he asked, "can you hear me? This is Mr. Beecham. We're getting you a doctor. We'll take care of you."

Bess moved her head painfully from side to side. "Jo," she muttered. Her lips were caked with blood and thick with swelling. "Baby."

Joanne's voice piped up beside Paul. "I'm here, Mama. I ain't going to leave you."

Paul looked at the child. Tears slid quietly, adult and careful, down her cheeks.

"Get a pillow," he told her, "and a wet washcloth. The doctor's coming. Everything will be all right."



He slipped the soiled pillow under Bess's head. As gently as he could, he wiped her face with the gray wet rag.

Poppy's steps labored toward him. "Bert be right over," he said. "He called the Fairmount ambulance. They're coming." He shook his head. "Said she might have internal injuries. Gotta go to the hospital."

Joanne put her head against her mother's hand.

Bess said, thickly, "What about Jo?"

Paul said, "We'll take care of her."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She tried to open her eyes. One of them was stuck tight. The other looked up at Paul wisely and wearily. "Suppose Mrs. Beecham would ride with me?"

"Anne?" Surprise edged Paul's voice before he could control it.

Bess shook her head. "'Course not," she muttered and closed her sad eye.

Bert came into the room. He sounded brusque. "Let's clear out of here. What's that child doing, witnessing a thing like this? Poppy, take her down with you. Paul, you better hang around outside. That Fairmount ambulance deal is driven by some dame. You want to campaign for something, you might try raising funds for an ambulance. We sure as hell need one." He bent over Bess and his voice changed. "There now, honey, we're going to fix you all up. You've been hurt before. Inside and out. You're a brave girl. Take it easy. Take a deep breath."

Paul stood for a moment listening to the kind words, watching the fine hands prepare a needle, seeing their deft way of sparing the sore flesh from even the tiniest prick. He loves the world, he thought, that's what's the matter with him; with Blake, too. They love the world. And they get hurt.

He turned on his heel, surprised at himself. I don't often get outside of my own mind, he thought, counting the stairs going

down. It's a thing that has been wrong with me from the beginning. I can't often see how it is with the other guy.

Except Blake. What he tells me, I see, and clearly. He thought of Blake's book. In snatches and pieces and paragraphs, late at night, Blake had read the book to him. Paul had taken thoughts of the book home with him. He had lain beside Anne, letting the day come, thinking of the words that Blake had strung together. It was not a pleasant book, but it was a real one.

—He saw Blake's face as it had been last week. He held the yellow sheets in his hand and all of the initial shyness of his reading to Paul was gone. Instead his voice surged with the excitement of rereading what had gone upon those pages from himself. When it was done, he sat back quietly, such a look of happiness on his face that Paul turned his gaze down to his forgotten coffee.

"Thirty," Blake said at last. "Thirty to it." He pulled out his cigarettes.

Paul said, "It's a good book. It's honest—and moving—"

Blake grinned. "You're prejudiced," he nodded. "So am I. I think it's good." He stood up. "By God, I think it's good."

They held positions quietly, smiling at each other.

"She'll hate it," Paul warned at last.

"Won't she just?" Blake agreed joyfully. Then he spoke seriously. "Tell you a thing, Paul. She won't even recognize herself. My grandmother used to say, when the minister gave the congregation personal hell, 'That's for Mrs. Jones. That's for Mrs. Smith.' Half the time he was beating her right on her own head, the old biddy. But she never knew it. Same way with—her."

Paul swallowed. "You—" he hesitated. "You feel the way the story says?"

Hard, bright color moved in Blake's face. "You ought to love a woman for her goodness," he managed at last, "because she adds to your manhood." He shrugged. "Guess I'm a nonconformist." He strode from the office in his abrupt way. "I'll polish this up

a little," he said at the door. "Get it retyped. Send a copy to New York."

Paul thought, watching him go, Those are the squarest shoulders I've ever seen. In a small way, I know how it is with him. He's come from a farther place than I, and his struggle has more drama, but he's justified himself at last. As I have, in my meek manner. . . .

Downstairs, out of the dark stairway and back in the sunlight, Paul saw the small crowd around the front door of the paper store. Mommy stood by the peanut machine and her voice vied with the high whistle.

"Beaten she was," she cried importantly. "Doc Young's with her now. Doc called the ambulance. I always said she'd come to no good. Many a time thought I'd write the building owner. But him in the city and all, he don't pay no attention. Just takes our rent and glad to get it. Even hers."

There was something about the faces, early morning, clean, fresh faces, that repulsed Paul. As if a certain slime had managed to slick over the soap and water.

He walked into the store and asked the operator for his home number.

Anne's voice was calm. "Yes, Paul?"

"It's Bess Marr," he said quickly. "She's taken a terrible beating, and they're going to send her to the Fairmount Hospital. Can you come down right away?"

"What do you want me for?"

"I don't want you." It was a lie, of course, but for the moment it made him feel good to say it. "Bess Marr does. She's got the idea she wants you to ride in the ambulance with her."

"Me?" Complete astonishment raised Anne's voice.

"You." Paul glanced out into the street. The high old-fashioned ambulance was jockeying for position. "And you'd better hurry," he went on quickly. "The ambulance is here now. I have to help Bert get her into it."

"But Paul," Anne protested. "What can she want with me—"

She sounds afraid, Paul thought. "You won't be contaminated," he cried. "Don't touch her if you don't want to. Just sit there and let her gaze on your alabaster features. Only hurry." He hung up.

It was a tough job to get the canvas stretcher down the narrow steps and around the sharp corners. If Bess Marr could have bit her lips, Paul thought, she probably would have gone right through them.

Bert cried impatiently, "Easy now, easy does it. God, if they'd just get us a hospital. This is the most backward, stupid—"

They moved outside to the accompaniment of his ire. They lifted the light burden into the back. Bert put a blanket over Bess and leaned toward her.

"I'm going to take my car," he explained. "I'll see you at the hospital, Bess. Just rest and let the shot get to you."

Bess asked, "Mrs. Beecham?"

The crowd parted and Anne walked through.

She looks as cool as ice and groomed for a party. I want to rumple her, Paul thought, and realized the desire had been with him for a long time. But I've seen Anne rumpled, her soul rumpled, and I couldn't stand that, either. He took her arm and helped her up the high back step.

Anne moved quietly toward Bess. She sat down on the small bench nailed to the floor. She reached out one hand and took Bess's in it. "Good morning, Bess," she said lightly. "I see you lost an argument."

Before the door closed Paul saw the sorry swollen lips twist into a sour grin.

The driver zoomed the ancient motor. The ambulance went forward with a jerk. The siren screamed, and the crowd outside the paper store pushed inside to continue its bone-picking.

Paul stood for a long time at the curb. There was some sort of analogy in his mind. Something about Bess's bruises being outside and easier to heal because the air could get at them. Some-

thing about Anne's bruises being in dark, secret places—bruises which fed upon themselves and grew and never healed.

He straightened his shoulders at last and stepped out across the street. His key stuck for a moment in the lock of the old door. A cold wind had blown up that was a stranger to the spring of the earlier morning. He went directly to the old typewriter and slapped a sheet of paper into it.

Before his fingers began to move he thought, I hate this place. What the hell am I doing here? What did Bess want Anne for?

He typed, "Bess Marr, who lives upstairs over the paper store—"

Poor Anne. All she wants is to be let alone.

Joanne Marr, Bess Marr's small daughter, is being cared for in the home of your editor until her mother is recovered. [*Marshville Herald*, April 2]

19

Anne sat quietly, feeling the vibrations of the old ambulance all through her, aware of the pain its jostling must mean to Bess, wishing she could stop Bess's terrible desire to talk.

Anne said, "You must lie still. Don't say anything."

But Bess went on. "I ain't talked to a woman, except a coupla girls like me, for years. Lemme talk. Please, Mrs. Beecham."

I wish she wouldn't, Anne thought; how I wish she wouldn't.

Bess said, "You were good to us that day when you were new here. You stopped right out in the daylight by the drugstore to fix Jo's knee. As if you cared about it."

"I did," Anne said. My world wasn't quite closed then. I cared a little then when somebody was hurt.

Damn Paul, she thought fiercely, why did he let me in for this? He could have said I was away, I was sick. He could have said anything. But he's never protected me and there's no reason why he should be thoughtful now.

The dreamy note of the hypodermic was in Bess's voice. "I just kinda wanted you to know that I was married once. Only fourteen and he wasn't good to me. But I was married. Wouldn't want you to think Joanne—" She took a deep breath. "I hurt," she whined. "I really hurt."

Anne patted her hand absent-mindedly. Fourteen, she thought, and I had a bicycle and a blue silk dress and a new tennis racket.

"I was near fifteen when I had Joanne. Gee, did I scream.

Back country we lived and no doctor. I'm braver now. Doc Young said I was a brave girl."

"You are," Anne agreed.

"He left me," Bess went on determinedly. "He run out on the baby and me. My folks wouldn't have me back. No good, they said he was."

Old, old story, Anne told herself cynically. She's making up half of it, most likely.

"You don't believe me," Bess said shrewdly. "You think I'm telling whoppers."

Anne shook her head against the expression in Bess's one visible eye.

"Well," Bess said after a pause, "I am. I can't seem to stick to the truth. I keep thinking better things, and they just up and out."

She pulled at the neck of her cheap blouse. She yanked out a chain. It had a ring on it, a dime-store ring, and a small crucifix thickly studded with glass stones.

"I used to wear this ring. Made it seem realer, you know. Used to wear the cross, too. Guy gave it to me once. Long time ago. Funny guy. Said pray for my sins and stayed with me a week." She tried to shake her head. "It takes all kinds," she finished solemnly.

Anne said, "You really must be quiet, Bess. We're almost there."

The bruised face became agitated. "Look, you do something about Jo, huh? Anybody else gets her now they'll take her away from me for sure. This thing comes out—a small town like this—they'll have my scalp."

"Who did it?" Anne asked, wondering for the first time.

Hatred rimmed Bess's words. "Jake Zfitales, he's a cabby in Fairmount. They have my scalp but I'll get his." The words that followed were vile words, out of the life that Bess had lived.

Anne choked down sudden nausea.

Bess stopped. There were tears in wet smears all over her face.

"Gee, Mrs. Beecham," she said harshly, "I'm sorry. I was going to be such a lady—tell you such a good story—you'd want to do something for Jo. Now it's all spoiled."

Anne found herself saying, "Now I want to help Joanne more than ever."

"Taking her away from me?"

Anne thought about it. "No. That's not for me to say. I don't want to get mixed up—"

Bess's voice was flat and tired. "I'm no good, for a fact. I've been at it since I was thirteen, and no matter how I used to say No, there I was. My Ma before me—"

And your daughter after you. Suddenly the ride seemed endless, and Anne was frantic with a desire to get home and take a long, cold, stinging shower to wash this off.

"Nobody made me," Bess went on, staring at the jolting ceiling of the ambulance. "Nobody ever said I had to. I didn't want Jo. But I got her. I aim to keep her."

"And what about Joanne?" Anne asked softly. "What about her when she's thirteen?"

Bess stirred restlessly and moaned with the motion. "I been thinking on it, but you can't know what it means. Somebody who belongs purely to me. Somebody who thinks I'm something—"

But does she? Anne wondered. And even if she does now, she can't stay innocent of the things around her for long.

"I'll take Joanne home," she said. "I'll keep her until you're out of the hospital."

Bess nodded, as if she had expected it all along. "I'll be beholden to you the rest of my life if you will," she said with simplicity and dignity. She fumbled with the chain around her neck. She held out the tawdry crucifix. "Here, you take this."

Anne's hand jerked away.

"Please," Bess insisted. "Take it and hold it and go say a prayer for me. For Jo, too." She pushed the cross roughly against Anne's arm. Anne forced her fingers to close around it. Bess sighed and let her head fall back.



The time at the hospital was like all such times, filled with smells and impersonal quick movements, and a sort of suspense that was almost touchable. Anne sat on a stiff chair in a narrow corridor and waited. She didn't quite know what she was waiting for, but she knew that she couldn't walk out of the place, find the bus station, and ride back to Marshville until that waiting had accomplished its purpose.

She closed her eyes and fatigue went through her like a sea-sickness. The corners of the cross cut against her clenched hand. Say a prayer for Bess Marr. Say a prayer for Joanne.

Bert's voice cut through her thoughts. "All bones set, all cuts washed, all bruises lathered. Come along, Anne. I'll give you a ride back home."

They rode up the wide highway in silence except for the surrounding uneven chatter of the old car's motor. Halfway to Marshville Bert swung into a diner.

"I could do with a cup of coffee," he said. "You could, too, by the looks of you."

The place was steamy and greasy, but the coffee was delicious. Bert leaned on the empty counter and spoke softly.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Do you?" Anne deliberately filled her eyes with disinterest.

He nodded, unabashed. "You're thinking that a slut can bear a child, can ruin a child, can have a life to distort. You're thinking that you, who could give a child so much—"

Something snapped. Anne cried, "For God's sake, shut up!"

To her surprise Bert grinned delightedly. "Good for you, sis," he cried back. "Hallelujah."

Anne put down her cup. It was shaking anyway. "Why?" She looked at the slim, tired man, his thinning hair, and the deep lines that zigzagged around his face. She didn't look at his eyes.

"It's the first time since you came to town, Mrs. Paul Beecham," he said happily, "that I've noted a completely human, unpremeditated action on your part."

"Is there any way I can persuade you to leave me and the deep inner recesses of my so-called soul alone, Dr. Young?"

Bert's grin held. "Not unless you move a thousand miles away, or I pass on to my reward." He put his hand over hers. "There's something about nosy country doctors that never lets them stop. Especially when they strike pure gold."

Anne found herself smiling, against her will. "Thank you, sir," she answered lightly, "but the vein has been mined out. Thinned to a bit of yellow dust." She got up. "I have to get back."

Bert slung a coin on the counter, smiling agreeably. "Me, too." He helped her gallantly into the car.

Once they had started, Bess's torn face rose before Anne's eyes. She said to Bert, "You seem very chipper for a man who has just seen the miserable mess of this morning."

Bert's answer came slowly. "I guess I am. Some things you just have to give up on. I gave up on Bess Marr a long time ago. This isn't the first time she's been badly treated. I doubt it will be the last." He stroked the steering wheel. "But sometimes, like you, you give up on something too soon. When you find it's been too soon, you feel pretty good about it. Especially if—if the person is important to you."

Not Jenny, Anne thought, don't tell me Jenny has suddenly reformed! "And you've had your faith recently restored?"

Bert nodded. When he spoke, he sounded shy. "It's my cousin Blake. He's written a book. A whole book. I haven't seen it, but Paul says it's good. Really good."

"I know. He told me so."

Bert went on. "I owe your husband a lot. It's beginning to look as if several of us do. The town, too, but mostly me. For Blake. For Jerry." He turned the car off the highway and down the main street of Marshville.

"Really?"

Bert nodded. "You've got a real man there, Anne. Which is another reason I'd like to see—"

Anne broke in quickly, "There's a crowd around the paper store still. Let me off at the *Herald*, please."

Bert pulled in to the curb. "What are you going to do now?"

Anne opened the door and stepped out. "I don't quiz you," she said. "Let's make it mutual. And thanks for the ride." She slammed the door decisively and walked quickly into the *Herald* office.

Paul looked up from his typewriter. "She's in the back room. You can take her out the alley and nobody will notice."

Anne held still, looking at him in the light of Bert's words. "How did you know?"

Paul stood up and came toward her. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I knew." He paused, and went on. "Just one thing, Anne. This kid is Bess Marr's. She's sad and pathetic and enough to tear your heart—mine, too. But she's still blood of her mother and an unknown father. Remember that, will you?"

Anne lifted her eyes to his. Behind the glasses they were soft and very dark. They were the eyes to which she had awakened those two bad times in the hospital.

"I will," she said softly. "I promise."

For one clear-cut moment they stood there, together again.

Anne took Joanne home, washed her, fed her, and put her to bed, to the repetition of that promise. She's Bess Marr's kid.

I will remember it, she thought, watching the child fall almost instantly asleep. How small she looks in that wide bed. How strange she looks, her face for once cleaned of all the dirt, even the rings around her eyes that used to stay when I asked her to wash before her cocoa. How strange, with that soft, clean hair ten shades lighter than before I washed it. How strange, with her hand under her cheek, and that look of peace on her face that I never could quite bring to her before because she stayed so short a time.

Bess Marr, Anne reminded herself, is going to get well. Her nose is broken and one of her wrists, and it will be a long time before she gets back even her worn-out prettiness. But she's going

to get well. She'll come here and wiggle a finger, and the child will run down the stairs into her arms, and they'll go off together to those dirty rooms. Bess will give her quarters again, and the filth will come back into the soft hair.

She thought stubbornly, I'll never give Joanne and Sally Young cocoa again. I'll never have another party for them. She shut the door and went slowly back down the stairs. From the hall table she picked up the crucifix. She stared at it intently for a moment and then walked out the front door.

She didn't pause at the church steps, but ran up them before she could change her mind. Inside the church she knelt at once, folded her hands and stared at the little cross. In the dim light the glass stones were like diamonds.

She waited for something to happen. For words. For ease to come. Instead she was conscious only of the dampness of the old church, the hardness of the bench against her knees, and a faint, dusty odor that tickled her nose.

"For Bess," she made herself whisper, "another chance, maybe. For the little girl, a first chance."

There was no answer. After a while she got up slowly and went back home.

She put a custard in the oven, timing it for Joanne's awakening. She whipped up a chocolate cake because it was something Paul liked and she hadn't made one for a very long time. She didn't know why she was impelled to either task, but she felt a certain serenity in doing them that she hadn't been able to attain in the church.

She didn't try to figure the reason. She was tired of figuring.

Jacob Zfitales, Fairmount, indicted for assault on Bess Marr, Marshville was tried and found guilty Wednesday and sentenced to one year and a day in the county jail. [*Marshville Herald*, April 9]

## 20

The minute Margaret Arrington stepped inside the tiny hospital room she knew she was dressed all wrong. She shouldn't have worn the soft tan coat and she ought to have taken off her rings. She didn't mean to play Lady Bountiful, and there was no reason to antagonize the poor thing lying there on the bed, sizing her up coldly.

Margaret put the flowers on the dresser and set the candy beside them. "I brought you a few little things. Some magazines, too."

Bess didn't answer. She just stared a lopsided stare that made Margaret nervous.

"Bert says you're much better. He says you can come home tomorrow."

Bess's mouth, the swelling less noticeable below the nose tapings, managed a very fine sneer. "Home."

"What did you say?" Margaret walked nearer and peered down, trying to read the twisted lips.

Bess shook her head.

Margaret smiled, holding up a flat cardboard box. "I didn't know your exact size, but I think I guessed pretty close. There are underthings and I found a really pretty little dress—with a jacket. Red. I thought you might like red—"

Her words ran down against the expression on Bess's face. Of

course not red, she thought exasperatedly. How stupid can you be? I wish I'd never come. She took a deep breath.

"Bess," she said, "it's going to be better for you."

"Oh, yeah," Bess whispered, keeping her lips stiff. "You—you're the one I hate the most. So sure of yourself, waltzing around town, never seeing me, not even seeing Joanne. Not snubbing us, just never seeing beyond yourself."

Margaret leaned closer. "What did you say?" She was unaware of the note of pleading in her voice.

Bess said loudly, "I don't want nothing from you."

Margaret straightened up. "I was afraid of that." Her eyes searched the room, trying to find somewhere to rest except on the alien face, the tense, resentful body. Then, because there was nothing else to say, she said the truth almost to herself, "You wouldn't understand, I guess. Sara brought my breakfast this morning. The tray looked beautiful. The first spring flowers. I put my hand down and touched the sheets, they were soft—" She stopped.

Bess's gaze was confused, like a child trying to understand a story beyond her years.

Margaret shrugged. "That's about all. Only everything in the Pillars looked luxurious, expensive. I sat in the study and read my mail. The *Herald* came. There was a little item saying that—that man had been sentenced and that you were recovering. I had the strangest thought." She sat down in the straight chair beside the bed. She stared across it, out the narrow, blurred window. "I thought—there, but for the grace of God, go I."

It came back to her then, that feeling. Such a silly thing for the wife of Walt Arrington to think. Such a silly thing for a girl educated in a Washington finishing school, brought up in a home of gracious, old-fashioned charm. Women like Bess Marr existed, she supposed. She'd never heard much about them. The Margarets of this world were protected always from the sordid, the unpleasant. They could grow old in innocence. Somebody like Jenny now, a part of your life, you heard a lot and discounted

much of it. Or you were aware that many women made one mistake and paid for it. It was close in a town the size of Marshville, where errors made at sixteen were remembered the balance of a lifetime. Maybe not exactly held against you, but remembered.

"I've been very lucky," she said to herself and to Bess Marr. "I found the man I loved when I was extremely young—and he wanted to marry me. All of my happiness has extended from such a simple thing—"

There was quiet in the small room. It seemed to fill in slowly, starting at the bed and reaching out to the corners. Bess interrupted her thoughts. "I don't know what you're getting at—"

Margaret laughed sharply. "I don't know myself, Bess," she admitted. "I just want to do something for you. I thought—maybe if I gave you some money you could take your child and go away to a bigger place. You could get a job—could start over—"

Bess was still for a time, then she said, slowly, "Looks like I ought to say thank you. But it ain't in me to. Women like you always looked down on me, clubbed up against me. No reason I should make you feel like a hero."

A Lady Bountiful, Margaret thought again.

Bess said, "I got no call to tell you. But you ought to know. You give me money, I go away, sure. Marshville's got me by the throat. Already the landlord's told me not to come back. I got no place to stay. So I take your money. Maybe I cry a little and say bless you, grand lady. You saved me, you saved my baby." She turned restlessly, grunting a little.

Margaret said eagerly, "Then you can use my help?"

Bess shook her head. "What happens? I get to a city, any city. Maybe I get a job for a little while. Then some guy looks at me a certain way, I get tired of working. There I am again."

Margaret tried not to gasp.

Bess looked at her shrewdly. "Makes you kinda sick, don't it? Trouble is, you're all hidden and protected in your fine house.

But things goes on. Your Walt now—I seen him and some dame—” She stopped again.

It started in the pit of Margaret’s stomach, a ruffle of nausea, and it climbed to her throat, blocking it harshly. It was true then, it wasn’t just Jenny and her tongue. The way Walt looked across the room at Anne—seeing nothing else. It was true. Even she could see it, she who could see so little else. Bess Marr had no reason to lie.

Bess reached out a thin hand and held it within touching distance of Margaret’s coat. “I shouldn’t have said that,” she managed. “Just the look on your face got my goat. So shocked like.” She leaned up on her elbows, effort in the slow movement. “I don’t want your damned money,” she cried fiercely. “I don’t want no money off no woman in Marshville. You all think you’re so high and mighty. But you earn it the same way I do. Hanging on to just one man, though. Sucking him dry. Sending him out to work for you and belittling him in front of your fine friends.” She lifted her head high off the pillow, almost proudly. “I know I ain’t much. But I give something. And that’s more than the rest of you do. What’d you ever give Mr. Arrington, for instance?”

Margaret stood up. She was shaking. She wanted desperately to get into the fresh air before the shaking hit the back of her knees.

Bess shrilled, “That’s right. Get out. Walk out. Anything nasty you walk out on. All of you.” To Margaret’s surprise she started to cry, fiercely, unwillingly, loudly.

Margaret stood awkwardly beside her. After a moment she went to the dresser, opened her purse and laid a packet of bills next to the magazines and the dress box. She looked back at the bed numbly, then she pulled her coat around her, and walked out of the room.

The corridor seemed very long. She felt the pounding of her head clear to the balls of her feet, but it was secondary to the chaos in her mind. The decision walked with her, waiting for her to stop, to face it, to answer it.



Bert had said, after all the pain and the probing, "There's that friend of mine in Baltimore, Margaret. I'll write to him if you like. He'll make arrangements. He'll want to examine you himself, but I truly think there's a good chance he'll operate." Bert put his hand over hers, leaned close and said deliberately, "And a good chance he will be successful."

To see again. To see the feathers on those birds that circled and fluttered outside of her window in the morning. To see the yellowed keyboard of the old piano in the big room. And words in books. And Walt's eyes—really to see his eyes again.

And what would she find in his eyes? If she were a whole woman he would feel free then, knowing there was no reason for her to cling to him. He could face her, an equal at last, and say, "I love another woman. I have been tied to you only by your need and my loyalty."

All the days since she had seen Bert she had lived with the knowledge, and each morning, each night, all the hours between, she had balanced precariously on the tightrope of her emotions. She did it calmly enough, with a waiting in her that was for the misstep which would plunge her off the wire, one way or the other. Seeing, and the chance of losing Walt forever. The blurred fog of the present, and the appeal to his tenderness.

"What'd you ever give Mr. Arrington, for instance?"

Walking quickly out of the hospital, stepping into the waiting cab, she knew that the decision would have to be made pretty soon now. She was tired, and she ached, body and mind.

She waited in the study for Walt to come home. She moved around the room touching the fine porcelain, the leather of the books, the brocade of the chairs. She remembered how it had been when Nancy was small. How the furniture was covered with sturdy bright material that would resist small scuffing feet. She was suddenly and deeply lonely for her daughter. But she was lonelier for her husband.

Sara came in with a cup of hot tea on a silver tray. She glanced

quickly at Margaret, then set it down carefully. "You're fretting yourself and you mustn't," she said.

"Go away, Sara," Margaret snapped.

Sara's dark face seemed to turn a lighter shade at the tone she had never heard before.

I've been nearly blind in more ways than one, Margaret thought frantically. I've taken everything Walt had to give and I've given little in exchange. It's been a handy thing, this weakness of mine.

Walt's voice asked, "Sitting in the dark?"

She was on her feet at once. "I have to know," she said sharply, quickly, "have I given you anything you needed the whole of our lives together? Have I—have I sucked you dry?"

Walt laughed, "Now whatever—"

"Do you want somebody younger—newer—like—like Anne Beecham? Is it true?"

The laughter slipped from Walt. He sat down heavily. He looked at his hands. He swallowed hard. "Margaret," he said, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world—"

Margaret paced before him. There was vigor in her stride and an animation he had never seen before. "Maybe it's time I was hurt," she said bitterly. "Maybe it's time I knew something straight and true about the world. I've been sitting here, trying to think back. Headaches and Nancy, those were times of physical pain. But I've had no other reality. Do you see that, Walt? I've had rooms to decorate and meals to plan and people to talk to about nothing, and none of them has needed me. You've never needed me, Walt. Even Nancy—Sara did for her better than I."

"I've never heard you talk like this, Margaret." There was a furrow of worry between Walt's eyes, but he didn't deny her statements.

"Of course you haven't. I've never felt like this." The pacing stopped. Margaret sat down on the broad davenport. "I've never felt like this and I don't know what to do about it."

Walt asked, "Who's been talking about—about Anne and me?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that I've known it, inside of me, long before Anne came to town."

Walt leaned forward. "Margaret, I swear there's nothing—"

Her hand was quick flung to stop him. "I know there isn't. Actually. Physically. I know you. And I know Anne. You're wonderful people, both of you." Her throat turned suddenly dry so that she couldn't swallow.

"You're pretty wonderful yourself," Walt said gently.

"Mutual admiration society."

"Mutual affection," he corrected.

"Affection—admiration—" she scoffed. "What have they to do with love?"

It was true, she thought in surprise. She had great respect for Walt. But if he were no good, a criminal like the man who beat up Bess, she couldn't have muffled her love for him.

"They have a great deal to do with it," Walt said positively. He stood up and came over to her. He sat beside her and took her hands, leaning his face close. "Margaret, a handful of Tuesday nights I walked with Anne Beecham. We talked. That's all."

She shook her head. "Not all," she said. "What you talked about, what you felt, why you needed to be with her—"

The telephone shrieked close to Walt's ear. He lifted the receiver and snapped, "Yes?"

Margaret peered at him. His face seemed to shuck its ruddy color. His mouth opened and closed. His hands knotted around the phone.

"Yes," he said, in a voice she had never heard. "Yes. I'll be right there." He hung up, missing the phone's cradle on the first try.

The room was quiet for a long moment as he sat staring straight ahead of him. Margaret was conscious of a sound that had been going on outside for some time. It was the high, antiquated whine

of the Marshville fire engine, combined with the fast, breathless tolling of the Presbyterian Church bell.

"Walt," she whispered.

He turned to her. "It's the plant. It started somewhere inside and it's out of control."

"Walt," she repeated.

He stood up. He didn't look like the vigorous, charming Walt Arrington, the biggest man in Marshville. He looked, for the first time, his full age. He stared at Margaret and in his eyes there was fear, total and begging.

"Margaret," he asked, in a voice of terrible quiet, "how am I—" He closed his eyes, squinting them painfully. "If the plant goes," he whispered to himself, "I go."

Denial rose quickly in Margaret's throat. He mustn't feel like that. There were resources, there was insurance, there was everything to start again.

"Walt," she began steadily. But before she could go on, he walked across the room and out of the door. The engine's clang lifted and died, lifted and died, in rhythm with his footsteps.

Margaret sat where she was for a while. Her mind was clear and active, making quick plans. When they were organized, she reached for the phone and asked for Bert's number.

While she waited, a strange sort of exultation began to well up inside her. The expression on Walt's face, the switch of his body toward her, as if, at last, he needed her, as if perhaps he pulled something from her that gave him strength enough to go out and see his life's work burn up.

She said, "Bert, I won't keep you. I know you'll want to get to the plant. But I had to tell you. Schedule the examination and operation for any time next week, will you? I can be packed to leave for Baltimore Monday."

She hung up before he could say anything. Her mind raced crazily into the future, like the fire, out of control. When Walt rebuilt the plant, if he still wanted her, he was going to have a whole wife who could see clearly to help him. To help Walt.

She shut her mind with a snap on two other thoughts. If Walt shouldn't want her. If the operation shouldn't be successful.

She went to the closet for her coat. She called, "Sara, make some pots of coffee and have Hennery bring them over to the plant. And hurry up about it."

She opened the great front door and joined the people hurrying down Main Street toward the red glare at the edge of town. She ignored their glances and stepped out sharply. Her muscles felt supple and young. She hadn't a trace of a headache.

Fire of an unknown origin gutted the Arrington Knitting Mills last Saturday night. One local fireman was slightly burned, but there were no other casualties, as the conflagration started after working hours. All of the records of the factory were destroyed. Both Marshville engines responded to the alarm but were unsuccessful in conquering the blaze. [*Marshville Herald*, April 9]

## 21

It was eleven o'clock. Walt Arrington's plant was a smoking pile of rubble on the edge of town. The greatest of the cluckers around the charred shell, the best of the gossips, the most hypocritical of the mourners, had long ago left for home. Paul went to the *Herald*, wrote his story and knew a sudden impatience to be with Anne, quiet and safe in the comfort of the wide bed.

He had caught only one glimpse of her in the confusion of the fire. She stood quietly, away from the hubbub, her coat pulled closely about her although the night was warm. The flames, still climbing upward, were a fierce frame for the clarity of her profile, the gleam of her hair. Their colors put sadness on Anne's face, a tired sort of perennial sadness that was unbearably hopeless.

Looking at his wife then, Paul had thought, I'm man enough to make it up to her. I can persuade her now that everything will be all right. Not only will be, but is going to be. He felt strong with the knowledge, and glad with it.

Somewhere, in a manner somewhat obscure to him, he had become what he should have been long ago. A working, thinking man in the world of men. Gazing around him, taking frantic

notes on his little pad, stopping to help Walt lift the heavy hose, holding Bert's medicine bag while Bert dressed a volunteer fireman's burns, putting his arm around Margaret, shooing the eager, small colored children back from danger, Paul knew without saying it that he was finally and definitely at home with himself.

It was a great discovery, and it seeped wordlessly into him all the time he wrote the story of Walt's tragedy, turned out the lights, and locked the paper up for the night.

Walking home through the empty streets, the faintly acrid smell of the fire like fog over the town, there was this power in him, this confidence, that he had felt only for frustrating minutes before, the lack of which he had never fully realized till that time with Blake there in the marshes.

Now, he thought surely, turning the corner of Sassafras Street, watching the lights of his home stretch toward him, it's here to stay. He didn't know how he knew, but it was a certainty in him that lengthened his eager steps and straightened his back. Anything was possible, and Anne couldn't help but see it.

As he turned the corner of Sassafras Street, he saw a man's figure run down the steps of his house and head toward him. In the dull light of the corner lamp Paul recognized Walt Arrington.

When Walt was abreast of him Paul halted, waiting for him to speak. But Walt didn't seem to see him. Paul reached out and grabbed his sleeve.

"Walt," he said sharply, but Walt didn't seem to hear. "Walt."

The eyes that finally lighted on Paul were reserved, cool. "Beecham."

"Did you want to see me?" A strange little tic caught the corner of Paul's mouth.

"You?" Walt shook his head. "No, I didn't want to see you. Why?"

Paul gestured toward his house.

Walt moved his head to look back. The porch was dark now.

"Oh, that." He shook his head again. "If you'll excuse me, please, I'm in a hurry."

Paul looked down and realized that he still clutched Walt's sleeve. He loosened his fingers. Walt stepped away from him, fiercely somehow.

Paul moved, too, toward his home. Slowly, delicately, a thin-bladed knife touched against his jacket, his shirt, the skin of his chest. By the time he opened the door he could feel the breaking of that skin. He took a long breath, knowing by some instinct that he was going to have to bear a greater pain.

He stood in the doorway, and through the haze of his knowledge, through the beginning prick of the knife, he called loudly to frighten fear away, to push the knife back. "Anne! Anne!"

She rose from in front of the fireplace, dimmed to glowing ashes, as Walt's plant was. As I am, Paul thought, and felt the first pain.

"What was Walt Arrington doing here?" he demanded, too loudly.

"Paul." Anne moved toward him, slowly. He could read nothing on her face. "Paul, what's the matter with you?"

"You're the matter with me," he heard himself crying. "What was Walt Arrington doing here?"

He saw her face harden. He saw a thinness to her lips that had never been there before. She knotted her hands before her.

"He was kissing me good-by."

"Good-by? Where's he going?" Then the first part of the sentence hit him and it was a hammer blow against his chest.

"Kissing? Only that?"

Something slapped Anne that time. Her face lost its color as if it were washed away.

"That would be hard for you to understand, wouldn't it?" she cried angrily. There was no considered softness, no calmness, in her voice. "You just couldn't comprehend one kiss, could you? It's all or nothing with you, isn't it?"

Through the clamor of his jangled emotions Paul knew one



more. The begging was over. By God, this woman had hurt him enough. This time he would knock down the doors with his fist, the way they should be knocked down. Blasted, kicked, forced, until she stood there, revealed and female and his once again.

The fireplace snapped. The look in Anne's eyes was not one of love. Her face was set hard against him. It was too late, too late.

Paul swung around and hurried from the room, from the house, in short running steps, back to the newspaper office, to the security of his recent feelings. Once there, he sat panting in the straight chair before his desk. He put his head down in his hands, away from the light.

Too late. I could grab her and take her and make her share my love and my fury. But I've been too late with my growing. I've taken too long about it.

The tension ebbed out of him slowly, during an unknown time. When it was gone, he saw clearly that he could not blame Anne. She had waited a long time for him, had suffered to capacity over him, had turned at last, naturally and simply, to a stronger man.

It made a mess that would tear Marshville wide open. Or maybe it already was open. Maybe everybody knew about them, and this wasn't the first time. He found that he could bear even that thought. The very fact that he could was a strange sort of sustenance. It put him in the big league, the league with Bert, who bore with Jenny and worried over Blake and his children without spilling his miseries all over the place. It put him in the league with Walt himself, who carried an interest in people and an ailing wife into success. Walt, who tonight had stood quietly gazing at the wreckage of a life's work and had said, "It makes such a small pile of ashes for the wind to blow away."

He looked up at the click of the door. Blake stood on the threshold. Darkness was behind him and his face blurred with shadows.

Paul pushed a hand against his weary forehead. "Come in," he offered. "How about you making the coffee tonight?"

Blake didn't move.

"Shut the door," Paul called, more sharply than he meant to.

Blake reached one foot behind the other and kicked the door shut. It slammed, rattled twice, and set itself to silence. When Blake stepped out of the shadows, the harsh overhead light caught at his face and scratched it with sharp brilliance. His forehead, his cheeks, his mouth and chin looked ravaged, as if there should have been blood in the lines that rutted them.

But Paul did not look closely. For the first time he wasn't glad to see Blake. Alone in the office, he felt that he might be able to figure things out, might be able, somewhere, to find the solution to the problem that Anne had forced upon him.

The mind is a toenail, he told himself inanely. If you keep it clipped straight across, neat and flat, it is there and you don't know you have it. It fits easily into your shoe and gives you no pain. But if you let the toenail get ingrown, embedded in the soft flesh, the pain is sharp and always with you and it slows your movements.

As long as I didn't think about us, as long as I let the problem of Anne stay in the bottom drawer, my life went smoothly. But now the drawer is open—that I know she has been in another man's arms—

Blake moved very carefully up to the desk. Cradled in his hands was a Manila envelope. He extended it toward Paul. Paul pulled himself, with difficulty, out of his thoughts and the thing he had learned tonight.

"What's that? An editorial?"

Blake shook his head but he did not speak.

"I'm in no mood for guessing games, Blake. All the troubles in the world aren't yours."

Blake backed up a step, uncertainly. His eyelids flickered. "I want to take your car. Let me take your car."

Paul glanced at him sharply, then he reached into his pocket, pulled out the keys to the old gray car, and tossed them across the desk. Blake didn't let go his hold on the envelope. The keys

fell, with a musical sound, to the floor. Slowly, as if the brown paper weighed tangibly against his muscles, Blake set it down before Paul. Then he bent, with equal deliberation, to the floor. His fingers showed white against the desk's rim as he balanced himself. He stood up again, carefully.

"Thanks," he said. He put one hand down on the envelope, a deep frown on his face, and opened his mouth to say more. Then he closed it abruptly, reached across the desk and with a weird tenderness pushed back the piece of dark hair that always slipped down over Paul's forehead. "Thanks," he repeated. He turned and moved across the room and out of the door.

Paul sat staring after him, puzzled and embarrassed. It was the first time a man had ever touched him, except for a handshake or a clap on the back. He shrugged at last, and tried to go back to the problem of Anne.

But the thought of Blake itched the back of his mind. He reached across the desk and picked up the Manila envelope. On the front of it were the words, "To Blake, in return for favors received." The penmanship was childish and unformed. Some things you can't cover up. Paul was not surprised when he saw that the signature was Jenny's.

He opened the envelope. There was one yellow sheet inside of it. In capital letters the sheet bore the title, "Folly Theater, A Novel by Blake Marcus." Paul reached his hand inside the flap. It came out spotted with gray, sticky ashes. Walt Arrington's plant was not the only thing that had burned away to nothing.

Paul jumped with the movement of his nerves, his heart. Blake's words came back to him. "I'll get this retyped. Send a copy to New York." The aliveness of his face. Remembering it, panic hammered at Paul. Blake's face, as he had just seen it through the veil of his own misery, came clearer now. It was the face of a man tried beyond endurance. It was the face of a man who, having been without liquor for a thin-stretched time, has once more known the taste and drive of it.

Paul picked up the phone. While he listened to the repeated

ringing he thought, I should have seen it. I should have known. He's been so close to me. I should have seen it.

"Bert," he cried when the voice answered, "Blake's on a tear. Get down here right away. He has my car and there's no telling what will happen to him."

"Right away." Bert hung up sharply.

Paul picked up the phone again. It was answered almost at once this time.

Anne's voice sounded thick. "Yes?"

"I called to tell you I won't be home tonight." Paul's anger with Anne seemed filmy and far away.

"Oh," she said. "Paul," she went on and he could hear the drag of her breath, "you don't understand—"

"I understand well enough for the present," he said quickly. "We'll talk in the morning." I should say to you, "You're safe all night. You and your lover." I should say that.

The click of the receiver was Anne's, not his. It saved him from those words, as he knew he wanted to be saved. Bert's wheezing horn sounded eerily outside. Paul hurried to him.

Bert's thin hair was blown from his haste. The ridiculous stripe of his pajamas showed under his jacket and below his trousers. "It happens fast," he said, gunning the old motor. "We've got to find him quickly."

Paul touched one of the thin tense knees. "We'll find him," he said firmly. "We'll make the rounds and look for my car."

It took numberless stops in the roadhouses, the bars, the beer joints between Marshville and Fairmount and back again. It took all the sick, waning hours of the night. But they found him.

They found him just as the sun began to push itself weakly over the horizon of the marshes. They found him ten feet off the road through the tidewater, a road that was wide enough even for a child, or a drunken man, to stay on. If he had wanted to.

They found him under the slime and the muck and the brackish water. In the car which was being slowly sucked, front first, into the quicksand.

Paul drove back to get the bulldozers, the implements, the police, and the hearse—all of the business paraphernalia of pulling a dead man from the mire of his chosen grave. He left Bert there behind him, blue about the lips, shaken with more than the dawn's chill, bitterly insistent on keeping vigil with his cousin, all man now, no doctor anywhere. And Blake's words kept swirling through Paul's mind.

"You white-livered Sunday Mama's boy. Get off your scrawny ass and pull! You hear me, *pull grass!*"

It was a stupid thing, but Paul found himself answering, not knowing what he meant, but hearing the words come out clearly and definitely. "I'll pull," he said, "by all that's holy, Blake, I'll pull grass."

...No statement has as yet been made by President Walt Arrington as to future plans for rebuilding the Arrington Knitting Mills. However... [*Marshville Herald*, April 9]

## 22

Walt didn't consciously feel her beside him, yet he must have known Margaret was there because he talked to her.

The night was quiet now. For a long time he stood watching the rise of hissing steam. His shoulder had a sore spot where they had patted it, clapped it, slapped it heartily. His ears roared, the way they used to when he was a kid and tonsillitis set his fever to blazing. They roared with bells, shouts, a pale sickening whisper of trickling water. But slowly the night itself moved in where they had been, muffling them, just as darkness had at last blanketed the fearful brilliance of the flames.

He said, talking softly not to disturb the night again, not to send echoes screaming in his ears, "Blackness gets everybody and everything eventually. You know that? Just as the earth does. Dust and blackness and all effort wiped out, covered, buried."

He paused to hear himself, surprised at his words and his thoughts. It was like that first time walking with Anne, when she had spoken of the dying man across the street.

He stepped carefully over the still warm embers, the blackened boards, aware of the gentle shuffle of her feet behind him. "Here is where my office was," he said. "Here is where we put in that addition last year." He climbed over a pile of bricks. "Over there we installed the new machines five years ago."

Her hand pressed against his sleeve, pulling a little, as if she would have liked to yank him back from the past.

"Funny. It's like I was walking from room to room in the Pillars. In this burned-out—" He stopped. He rubbed his hand, a downward washing movement, from brow to chin. "Not really strange," he continued. "I've walked more here—and enjoyed it more here—than at home. In a way a man's working place is his home, isn't it? In a true way. I'm never sure about how I feel in the Pillars. Where I belong. I was always sure here. I always belonged here."

The murmur beside him was no more than a long-drawn breath.

"Did you know, the men and girls all called me Boss Man? I liked it, more than I'd admit."

"Walt," she said. "You can build again. You have everything to—"

"Can I?" he interrupted harshly. "Just like that? Build again." He laughed, and that was harsh, too. "It takes more than money. You have a child and you raise him and he is grown and he goes away. War perhaps. And he's killed." He swung his head from side to side. "You think starting over again with a new, squawling baby is going to be the same? Take his place?" He took her arm, feeling the rich stuff of her coat between his fingers. "You go along now," he commanded. "You and Hennery and Sara, you must be tired out. You made a sort of circus of it. Should have sold tickets. All those sandwiches. Gallons of coffee."

"Walt," she repeated urgently.

"I feel like walking," he said, forgetting her, forgetting his momentary anger at the sight of the curious crowds, the helping men, being served food. Like a party. Like a wake, where everybody stuffs himself around a dead man.

"Come along home with me," she said. "You need to sleep, Walt."

"I feel like walking," he repeated vaguely, and headed across the field. For a little he could sense her there, watching him go,

then he moved away from the feeling and knew that she had turned toward home.

The turmoil in his mind loosened suddenly. He let it swirl around him. Margaret had said it. They all had said it, slapping him on the back. Build again. A new, modern plant. All the latest stuff. Just like that. Snap of the fingers. Damn them all, a lot they knew! A lot anybody knew about him, Walt Arrington, and the life he had lived inside of himself, planning, looking forward, giving all of his youth to the bricks that added room after room to the plant. Love it was, by God, pure love that went into it, and no smart-aleck young architect from the city with plans for squared-off corners and flat roofs and glass could give him something to love again like that. The love of a lifetime, that's what it was.

A lifetime. Getting old. Too old to begin again, so tired that the marrow of his bones seemed to have turned to ashes along with everything else. He shivered, as if he'd been too long near a warm fire and had stepped suddenly into the outdoors. That I have, he thought, that I have.

Town pavements were smooth and hard under his feet now. The streets were as unfamiliar as if he walked alone in a strange city, searching for an unknown address. Even the trees, trying on their new leaves for size, seemed unreal, stagy, too dramatic for the scattered street lights.

When at last he stood in front of the small white house on Sassafras Street, the strangeness went away somewhere, and he had the feeling of homecoming. He walked up the steps and across the porch, and it seemed that the grooves in the worn wood fitted the toes, the arch, and heel of his foot like a good shoe. He rang the bell and waited. He was full of a sudden pause in his emotions. Everything stops for tea, he thought.

Anne was slim and lovely, surrounded by light, as she answered the door. "Come in, Walt," she invited, and if there was surprise in her voice he couldn't find it. He stood awkwardly in the little hall looking around him. It struck him as being differ-



ent; then he knew he had never forgotten the way it used to be.

Anne said, "You'll want to wash. There are towels in the top bathroom drawer. I'll make you a drink."

He nodded and walked up the stairs. At the top he looked into the larger bedroom. Here Anne Beecham slept, perhaps in the arms of her husband, as Margaret had once done. He turned and opened the door of Nancy's room.

A vague light filtered in through the curtains. It landed on the form of a little girl, her hair spread, her lashes dark against the moon-whitened face.

Walt started to shake so that he could hardly close the door. Of course not, he thought. You're going batty. Of course not. He was in the bathroom, leaning weakly against the washbowl, before he remembered Bess Marr's kid.

He lifted his head and caught sight of himself in the mirror. His lips were pulled back against his teeth, and those teeth shone white in the grime, the streaked charcoal, the burnt cork smear of his face. No wonder Anne had suggested washing.

He stared at himself seriously for a long time. He looked like a miner, all accent in his eyes, so that they seemed larger, darker, more important than they were. All those people out of work, he thought, watching his eyes reflect his mind, all those people, and Walt Arrington, too.

He reached for the soap. The streaks on his face looked too much as if they might have been the tracks of tears. He worked vigorously with lathered hands, ignoring the washcloths. Wouldn't want to spoil Anne's pretty washcloths.

The thought of Anne came to him slowly, steadily. He added up each time they had been together, and when it was totaled, he told himself he knew why he was here, washing in Paul Beecham's bathroom, staring at Paul Beecham's toothbrush, his shaving lotion. He combed his hair with Paul Beecham's comb, straightened his tie as best he could, and went back downstairs, tiptoeing past the room that had once held Nancy and now another six-year-old.

Anne's fire was still glowing. Her book was face downward on the stand beside a big chair.

"Thought you were giving up book larnin'," Walt commented.

Anne handed him a tall glass. "This ought to be a hot lemonade."

He downed half the drink in quick gulps, then he set it on the coffee table and lowered himself carefully into the big chair. "I had to come, I didn't mean to, understand. I just started walking when it was all over and I ended up here." He kept his eyes on his glass. The ginger-ale bubbles popped like minute balloons. "Why, Anne?"

She sat down opposite him, stared into the fire, and cleared her throat.

Walt waited, but she spoke no words. "Those times when we walked together," he went on at last, "you told me there was nothing. No tenderness. Yet everything you said had tenderness in it, like a background of music. Hard to hear, but there."

Anne lifted her head and looked at him. "Walt," she said, "you've come to the wrong place." She tied her hands together with her fingers. "There's a little girl asleep upstairs. A little girl who is getting fatter and more secure and prettier every day. She follows me around like a puppy and she pats my cheek." She swallowed hard. "If there were any tenderness in me—any love—don't you think it would show, would come out, with her?"

Walt said, "Tonight all my work vanished right before my eyes." He shrugged. "All my work—everything. And I came here. I came here because there's a strength and compassion in you that I've felt from the beginning. Because now I need them for the first time."

Anne shook her head. "I don't want to sound like a know-it-all," she said slowly. "But I expected you, I knew you would come. But not because of me, Walt. Not for what you could get from me. I have nothing to give you. To give anybody."

When Walt started to protest she went on quickly, "You came

for the same reason Margaret came here all those years—”

“Margaret?” he interrupted. He suddenly remembered the conversation he and his wife had been having when the phone rang. He remembered the way Margaret paced, the things she said.

“Every Friday for fifteen years Margaret cleaned this little house. Can you guess the reason for that, Walt?”

He came back to the present and shook his head.

“Because she pulled a kind of strength from here—not from anybody—but from here itself,” Anne said. “I’m not very wise and I’ve made a mess of a lot of things, but I know that. And I know that you came here—not to me—but to this house. To this place of young hope and happiness and—and merging.”

Walt sat very still. He watched her mouth move, but this time it was what she said, not the shape of her lips, that held him.

“You haven’t been fair to Margaret,” Anne went on. “You’re such a big, generous guy. You’ve sort of wrapped her in your own kindness, treated her like a child. You haven’t given her a chance to do anything for you. You’ve never needed her.”

Walt shook his head as if to clear it. Margaret had asked him a question. “Have I given you anything you needed the whole of our lives together? Have I sucked you dry?”

Anne said decisively, “It’s her strength, her compassion, her love, you’re looking for. Not mine. She must have quite a bit of it stored up—ready for you to draw on.”

“Like cash in the bank,” Walt murmured.

Anne nodded. She returned her glance to the ashes in the fireplace, and Walt knew that she had said all there was for her to say.

Suddenly he was impatient to get away, anywhere, where he could think quietly and sort out this night. He stood up. Anne stood up, too.

They were together in the middle of the room. Walt reached out his arms, and Anne came into them naturally and calmly.

He put his mouth against hers and found it cool and fresh. He smoothed back her hair. The hand of friendship, he thought, and the words felt strangely familiar.

"Good-by, Anne."

"Good night, Walt." She followed him to the door. At the sidewalk he turned to wave at her. She held up her arm in a kind of quiet salute. He walked down the street. Paul Beecham stopped him briefly, but he seemed unreal to Walt beside the things that filled him.

The kiss was the same as the one he had given Nancy when she left for England. Fatherly, filled with a sort of love for all youth, and a sadness for it, too.

That's that, he thought. Whatever I built up in my mind about that strange, wise, unhappy child, it was false and maybe a little ridiculous. But it didn't hurt me any—it did me good. I hope it hasn't hurt Margaret, the gossip of this town, the knowledge that her husband was no different from the rest, only in degree.

He had to walk, to think. He found himself following a rutted lane, a familiar narrow lane that led to a circle of trees above the stream. The water gleamed palely in the starlight, and as he moved toward it, he saw the figure in the soft, light coat.

"Margaret," he said aloud. "What are you doing here?"

She turned around, as if waiting for him. "Praying that you would go back far enough, Walt. To the beginning, when we were so strong."

He stood there, arrested, and he thought, She's stored it all up—like cash in the bank.

Blake Marcus, cousin of Dr. Bert Young, was killed in an auto accident on Highway 7X early Sunday morning when the car he was driving went out of control and ran off the road into the marsh. [Marshville Herald, April 9]

## 23

When Bert staggered into his house the morning of Blake's death, he found Jenny frozen in a corner of the living room, her hand against her mouth. He wasn't aware of her at first. He turned instead to Gram, who had loved Blake too.

She was a stanch, tough old tree with her arms around him. "There now," she murmured, "there now," as she had when he and Blake were boys and things had gone against them. "There now."

When he managed to pull himself together, he saw Jenny's eyes above the blood red of her fingernails. They were greener than grass and they held an expression of fear that spoke more brightly than their color. He could not expect anything as deep as grief in Jenny, but why fear? He took a step toward her and watched her shrink away from him. "Why?" he asked aloud. "Why are you scared, Jenny?"

The wrinkles in her face had a bas-relief look, as if they had worked themselves outward, instead of creased inward. She shook her head. "Me? Scared?" she countered. "You're nuts, Bert. Only shocked. I'm shocked."

Gram said, "You go upstairs, boy. Take a warm bath and get into bed. I'll bring you some breakfast."

Bert looked at his hands. They were only a part of the shivering. It was all through him. It had started there on the road

when they had caught sight of the tire marks, there in the marsh when he had seen the car angled above the grasses.

"An hour sooner," he had muttered to Paul. "Twenty minutes—"

Paul shook his head. He said, "No, Bert. It's been a long time."

But I'll never be sure, Bert thought. I should have guessed at the swamps first. Blake and his gunning, his fishing. It's horrible out there, but he always loved it.

"You are scared," he said again to Jenny. "Scared yellow. Something set him off. Something made him want that first drink." He moved another step. "Was it you? What did you do, you slut?"

Gram grabbed his sleeve. "Later, Bert," she said tightly. "Come now, boy. Come on." She put her thin old arm around his waist, and Bert found himself moving slowly up the stairs, leaning on her.

He sank down wearily on the bed. The pain around his heart was sharp and constant and streaked down into his arm, and he couldn't stop shaking. Gram bent to untie his shoes. He watched the clean part in her white hair and saw instead the way the old car had plowed through the high grasses. A clean swipe.

He reached for a long breath, to clear the stab in his chest. It came up at last, and with it came the sobs that he hadn't known were there and which, once released, took all of him by force.

Gram sat on the bed beside him. She pulled his head gently into her lap. She rocked back and forth.

Bert heard his own words, from a far distance. "Such a good kid. Those days when he was riding high. If I'd never had him here. She did it. Robbed him. Robbed me." The sobs began to burn away, melted by another emotion, an emotion he had kept well-hidden within himself. "The look on her face. What did she do, Gram? What did she say to him?"

Gram rocked silently.

The door opened, Bert looked up. Jenny stood there. The lines on her face were smoother now, and her eyes had their usual unreadable expression.

"Get hold of yourself, Bert," she said. "The men are here from the funeral home."

He stood up, snuffling like a little boy. He couldn't face Jenny. He couldn't face himself. He went into the bathroom and locked the door.

I could kill myself, he thought quite calmly, looking at his razor. It wouldn't be hard. It would be good and quiet and relieving. I know this moment why Blake did it. When all of your life seems slippery in your fingers, when you can't organize the movements of it. . . .

But Blake had. These past months, up there working on his book, he'd pulled his life into his own mind, filtered it and poured it out, clear and strong, onto clean pages of paper.

The book. Bert dried his hands hastily and unlocked the door. Jenny still stood in the doorway of the bedroom. He said to her, "Tell the men I can't talk to them now. Tell them I'll call them."

She opened her mouth to speak.

"You heard me," Bert said coldly. "And after you have, pack all your trinkets and gewgaws and move yourself to the guest room." He watched her look of amazement. "I don't know why just yet," he finished, "but I don't want to see your face. Keep out of my way. Completely."

He turned and went up the stairs to the third floor, to Blake's room.

It looked friendly and comfortable in the morning sunshine. Signs of Blake were there to be read. The stack of morning papers that he always liked to read, no doubt putting himself behind each by-line. The coffeepot on the small grill. The yellow sheets piled neatly on his desk. There was one other sign of

him to be read, too. An old sign and a new one. It was an empty whisky bottle, lying on its side on the floor, as if it, too, were drunk.

Bert walked directly to the desk. He flipped his hands through the blank pages on top. He started with the upper left-hand drawer and systematically went through notes, bills, unfinished paragraphs. When he had examined every drawer, checked into every Manila envelope, he stood still, pulling at his lower lip.

The book which had kept Blake sober was nowhere.

The thought started a pounding in Bert's wrists, part instinct, part Jenny's expression. Then he thought of Paul and felt a sudden relief. Of course. That was it. Blake had taken the book to Paul and left it there.

He ran back down the stairs and out of the house. Martha Evans passed him on her way to work. Mommy and Poppy were both outside of the paper store. Miz Maude opened the door of her old house and called out, "Bert!"

He passed them all by. He could feel their thoughts, touchable in the light morning air. He could feel it all, building and climbing. Marshville's big day, by the Lord Harry. Walt Arrington's plant gone. And Blake Marcus dead in the swamps. They could do a lot with so much to talk about. They could chew it over for months to come, speculate and analyze and make a thing of it. They could lay off each other for a while and talk about something really big.

The *Marshville Herald* was dark inside, no morning light showed. Bert tried the door but it was locked. He turned around and hurried back down the street toward Sassafras. He had to pass the funeral home. He tried not to look at it, but he couldn't help it. It was like any other house, white-columned, large, the mistake of an early settler. It might still have been a rich man's home, except for the gold and black sign that sat formally on the well-cared-for lawn. Morrison's Funeral Home, it read. Never really liked Morrison, Bert thought, an outlander in the first place, smug and so sort of pseudosolemn, even on cheerful oc-



casions. As if death sat on his shoulder and whispered in his ear and surrounded him with a careful false sympathy that he could extend to everybody, absolutely everybody, with no trouble at all.

If they've got to have places like that, he thought, they ought to look like institutions, not homes. They ought to be cold and bare and frightening, instead of cozy, with open fireplaces for those who never can know warmth again.

He stopped, fighting the returning pain in his chest and the lump in his throat. When Blake and he were boys at Gram's, they slept together. Cold nights in the little room in the attic their feet entwined lovingly for heat. Blake's feet were always so friendly, so willing to share their heat with his younger, smaller cousin.

Cold now, cold now, cold now, it made a rhythm to march to, those endless suspended miles to Sassafras Street.

[Funeral services for Blake  
Marcus were held on Wednesday  
at 2 P.M. in the Marshville Episco-  
pal Church. [*Marshville Herald*,  
April 9]

## 24

Paul's hands awakened Anne from a restless sleep. They were rough on her shoulders. "Blake's dead," he cried fiercely. "Dead and he could have lived. He could have lived. But it's over now."

She tried to sit up against the force of his fingers. "Oh, Paul," she whispered, horror all through her.

Paul shook her. "You pitiful, skimpy little thing," he cried, "how do you know it won't be you tomorrow? Or me? And all this time we could have lived our lives, really lived them."

"I'm sorry about Blake," she managed to say.

"You're sorry about nothing," he was almost sobbing. "You try to feel, oh, sure you do. You experiment a little—like last night with Walt—"

That gave her the power to push upright against his grip. "Last night," she cried, "was nothing—nothing at all—"

Paul looked at her consideringly, through eyes that were red-rimmed, as if he had been crying, or pacing a smoke-filled room, or been forever without sleep. "Compared to my sin?" he asked politely. He shook his head. "Pardon me, Anne. I shouldn't talk to you like that. I forgot. I'm on probation. I'm on the dole. And whatever you do is only what I deserve." He smiled a ragged, mean smile. He let go of her and walked to the window, pushing back the ruffled curtains roughly. "I loved that guy. I loved him, you hear."

Anne slipped out of bed, wrapped her robe around her, and walked out of the room.

Downstairs she put coffee on and fixed the fruit, the cereal. She waited for Joanne to wake up. She waited for Paul's pacing to stop, to know that he had gone to bed at last.

The little girl came in finally with a skip and a bounce that were new to her. She settled herself at the kitchen table. "I brushed my own teeth," she said proudly. She frowned. "I always used to never brush them. It tastes better this way, doesn't it?"

Anne looked at her. The full cheeks, the shining hair, like the skip and bounce, were new, were priceless. I've given her something, Anne thought. She won't want to be dirty again for a while, and that's my gift.

Outwardly, her mind ran on, she can scrub. But you couldn't get at the other places where her mother has left scum, could you? The inside places. That takes time. More time than you have.

Miz Maude's call yesterday was full of bubbling malicious talk of Bess. "And they're going to let her out of the hospital tomorrow. Wherever do you think she'll go, Anne? Mommy says the landlord refuses to let her back up there, and the colored people don't want any part of her. There isn't a shanty or alley in town that will shelter the likes of Bess Marr. What do you think? Have you been to see her?"

Anne answered sharply, "No. I've done enough for Bess Marr."

"Why, of course you have," Miz Maude placated. "Like I was saying to Margaret only the other day, people like that, even the child, how can you tell she isn't—well, tainted—"

Anne interrupted. "My soup's boiling over. I'll call you back sometime."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hold you up. My gracious, when I think—"

Anne put the receiver back in its cradle with a click.

Tomorrow was today. Any minute now, or at ten o'clock or noon or three, the doorbell could ring and Bess Marr would stand there, cleaner, as Joanne was cleaner, outside, and probably pale and pathetic. She would say, "I've come for Joanne." And Anne would never ask where the pair of them were going as they walked away, hand in hand, down the porch steps, down the path, through the gate, and out of her life. She could see them, growing smaller in her sight, until they vanished completely at the corner.

Only she wouldn't look, of course. She would push Joanne out, with her new small plastic suitcase full of clean, bright, starched clothes, with her new toothbrush, her new hairbrush, the socks, the shoes, the thin little picture books—she would push Joanne out and shut the door quickly.

What would she do then?

She said to Joanne, "Today is the day your mother will come for you."

The child put her spoon down on her plate. She stared at it.

It was like watching a play, the kind where the heroine starts out young and fresh and ages over the years, courtesy of a clever make-up department, until she looks older than any human being ever looked old, but still walks young. So that you never quite forget that she is young, no matter how realistic her performance.

Joanne stood up and she walked young, but that was the only thing that remained six years old. Certainly not her face turned up toward Anne.

"I have to go with Mama, don't I?" she asked. Certainly her voice was not young.

Anne found her lips tightening. "Of course."

Joanne nodded. "I know it." She stared at Anne for a solemn moment, as a grownup might, as a man quietly renouncing his love might. "Even if she was sick forever I couldn't stay here. I know that."

Anne walked abruptly to the sink and began to run water

furiously. When she turned around, Joanne was gone, and Paul, shaved and changed, stood in the doorway.

She poured coffee for him silently. He sat down at the table and stirred it around and around.

"Even if you could have her, you wouldn't want her," he said almost to himself. "That's what she meant. Kids are smart about things like that. Smarter than men, sometimes. Dumb as men in some ways, though. They pour out love just the same. It runs all over the place and there's no place for them to store it up in. First thing you know, it's wasted."

Anne asked, "How is Bert taking it?"

Paul stood up. "The hell with Bert. The hell with Blake, God bless him. What about us?"

"What about us?" Anne repeated. A sort of dazzlement was in her. Paul, the awkward, the shy, the gentle, the man who never forced himself where he wasn't wanted.

"Anne," he said quietly, "I want to tell you something. This is my town. My roots are down and I want to live here and die here. But I want to live here in contentment, as much as a driven human being can attain. I don't ask for happiness, but I have a right to a—a sort of serenity."

"And you can't get it with me?"

He shook his head. "Not the way you are. Not the way you have been."

Anne said, keeping her voice gentle against the sudden tightness in her throat, "I've tried, Paul."

He looked angry all over again. "You've tried," he scorned. "You've taken the thing I did to you—for which God knows, and you should, that I'm sorry to my soul—and you turned it inward. You've hugged it and loved it and petted it. It's been the only thing you did love. I realized that last night, after my first jealousy of Walt was over. Know why? Because I felt sorry for Walt. You couldn't love him. You have no love for anything except your grievance. Anything—or anybody. Even that poor kid—"

"You're the one who told me to remember that she was Bess Marr's child."

"You remembered it, all right," he said bitterly. "You remembered it dandy."

He sat down abruptly and put his head in his hands. "Forget it," he said in a muffled voice. "Seeing Blake there, dead in that car—hearing in my mind some of the things he had said—I wanted more than I have. I always will, I guess." He looked up. His eyes were still red, but his gaze was quiet and steady. "And I decided something. If I can't have it right, I don't want it at all."

Anne said, "I see. I see."

The doorbell rang demandingly. Paul pulled himself up and went to answer it.

"Bert," he asked. "What are you doing here?"

"The paper was closed," Bert said. "Where were you?"

Paul frowned. "The paper's closed today. Come on in, boy. Anne will give you a cup of coffee."

Bert walked into the house. The small fire touched him kindly, and he went to stand in front of it.

Anne brought a tray on a standard and put it beside the large chair. "Sit down, Bert." Her voice was soft, almost inaudible.

He sat down weakly. Then his mind took a crazy hop that he couldn't control. "I've been reading up," he said conversationally to Anne, to Paul, to the air in the room. "I think we can get you through that third month, Anne. Matter of intravenous feeding and staying in bed under supervision—" I'll have to ask him about the book, he thought numbly.

Paul said roughly, "Not this morning, Bert. Let's not talk about it today, eh?"

Anne said, "Or any day."

She and Paul stood very still.

Bert said, "Why—well—what do you know? Life goes on. By God, it does." He laughed briefly, harshly.

Paul came over to Bert's chair. He pulled out a cigarette, lit

it carefully. When he spoke his voice was careful, too, through the smoke. "If there's anything I can do for you, Bert, anything at all—"

Bert pushed the tray away. He watched Anne lift it and carry it to the kitchen. He said, "I went up to his room. I looked everywhere. Paul, the book is gone. Do you know what happened to Blake's manuscript?" He looked up sharply at the man standing above him, his face closed and secret. He rose to his own feet. He's going to tell me, he thought, he's going to tell me that he's got it at the office, that she didn't touch it after all.

But Paul didn't, not then. Instead he said, "Let's not worry about that today, Bert. I'll walk you home. What you need is one of your own sleeping pills."

Bert grabbed strongly at Paul's coat. "What I need," he yelled and knew he was yelling and didn't care, "is to know if that bitch I married got her hands on that book."

Paul didn't move. His stillness hit against Bert, an answer as solid as a thrown rock. Bert had to fight the pain that was all through him.

Paul gently loosened his hands and put his arm around the shaking shoulders. "Let's go down to the paper, shall we?"

Bert nodded and moved numbly toward the front door. He said, "Thanks for the coffee, Anne."

Anne moved up beside him. She smelled good, clean and fresh, not heavily scented like Jenny. Jenny. The bitch—the—no wonder she was scared. By God, he thought, she has good reason to be scared.

Anne said, "You didn't drink much." She put her hand on Bert's arm.

As they reached the door, the postman brought a special-delivery letter. Paul signed for it quickly and handed it to Anne.

Anne turned the envelope around and around. She slid one finger under the flap and tore it open. She turned over the single sheet of paper to see the signature. Her intake of breath was audible.

Paul asked quickly, "Bad news?"

"I don't know," Anne said thinly. "It's from Bess Marr—"

Suddenly Bert couldn't stand any more. He grabbed Paul by the arm and reached for the door. "I want to see Blake's book," he cried. "For God's sake, let me see what she did to it."

Paul said, "Yes, yes, of course." He opened the door and walked through it, his arm around Bert.

Anne watched them go. She stood there with the letter from Bess Marr in her hands. She stared at the illiterate signature and thought, She probably left school even before she was thirteen. She turned the ruled sheet over and forced herself to read what was written on it.

"Dear Missus," it read, "a lady come and give me some mony, a lot of it. I lay here and thot about it. I can go a long way on that mony. But not with a kid. What you sed no kid should go where I will go anyhow. Better she should be with you. Or with anybody you find. Or a home even. So when you get this I am gone. I am changing my name. I sware to God I won't ever come near Marshville again. I sware it so pleeze want her and keep her and she is little she will forget me. Pleeze. Bess."

Anne turned blindly back into the house, leaving the door open, knowing it vaguely, not caring.

It goes too fast, she thought frantically. Walt and Blake and Bert and Paul. Paul. Paul. And now Joanne. It goes too fast, and I can't think. I can't feel. I hurt all over and I can't find the place.

She dropped down on the davenport, her face cradled in her arms. After a while two tears slid reluctantly down her cheeks, like the tears on Joanne's face as she had lifted it to Anne, there in the kitchen.

In the very spot in the kitchen where Paul had said, "Even if you could have her, you wouldn't want her."



Margaret Arrington is making an extended stay in Baltimore according to the grapevine. She is accompanied by Sara. [*Marshville Herald*, April 9]

## 25

The night of the fire Margaret Arrington stood by the stream, in the dark and the quiet, praying that Walt would make a full circle and come to her. She heard him, in the crackling of bushes, the dull thud of his feet, before she could make him out.

Her heart was noisy inside of her chest. Her mind was full of the question of how it would be. He would see her, he would race toward her, lay his lips on hers, not on her cheek this time—She smiled at her nonsense, but it didn't quiet her heart.

It wasn't like that at all. He moved slowly and then stood quietly. He said only, "I want you to know one thing. I haven't made as big a fool of myself as I thought I had."

That had to be enough. That was enough, it was a lot really.

They walked, almost sauntering, back through the lanes, the trees, the sleeping streets. Once inside the Pillars, Walt kissed her gently on the top of her head. He put one hand under her chin and looked at her for a long moment. He said, "I think I can sleep now." He turned into his room.

Margaret didn't sleep, though. She lay awake and listened to the sound of her mind, making noises like an adult. For the first time, she realized, hearing the words of a slow, painful philosophy come forth.

There are many ways of living. All of them as individual as the people who draw breath, or the leaves upon a tree, or lines in a face. But there are, in general, two wide divisions. Some peo-

ple live outside-in and other people live inside-out—it's as simple as that.

She pretended that Walt was beside her, instead of soundly sleeping in his own room.

"Walt, I've been an outside-in one. My contentment, my joys in life, have been all the little things that happened to me. Oh, when I suffered, I suffered thoroughly. But like an animal, like a baby when a pin sticks it."

She smiled, there in the dark. "Outside-in ones, they can always blame circumstances. You know? Out of luck. Cards stacked against them, things didn't quite work out.

"You see, Walt, even when I suffered, that left me a lot. It left my ego intact, my self-respect."

When things go well, she thought, if you are an outside-in person, there is no limit to the outside materials that can bring you joy. Something as small as a shower in the morning, or coffee that is just right, or sunshine after a rainy spell, or a new chair, or a flattering look in a man's eyes, or even just a good night's sleep—or no headache—such things can set you up for the day and make all the hours bright.

The big trouble, of course, is that you live as a child lives. Your moods sway as quickly, as simply, as a baby's. It doesn't take much to make you happy, riding the seesaw of emotion. But, inversely, it doesn't take much to make you unhappy, either. You are vulnerable, you demand protection.

Margaret sat up and smoothed the pillow. She put her head back on it, gently. In the morning, she thought, I will begin to get ready. To prepare myself for the other way of living, the inside-out way. The giving way.

The two days went by quickly, filled with details and planning that Walt could have no part of. Bert's voice when he called her was remote. "Wednesday," he said. "Sign in Tuesday noon."

"But Wednesday," Margaret protested, "is Blake's funeral." She swallowed.

"So it is," Bert said. "But specialists are hard come by."

She couldn't find her friend Bert anywhere in the indifferent voice. "I'll go." She waited for him to wish her luck.

"Good," he said and hung up.

It wasn't hard to avoid Walt in those two days. He was seldom home. He seemed to walk a lot, and Hennery told her that he went out to the plant and just stood there.

"Just standin' and lookin'," Hennery mourned, "like a man over a grave."

There was in Margaret a longing to comfort him, to say, "You have more to work with than ever, Walt. There's the insurance money, of course, but there is also your wide experience, your accumulated knowledge." She thought of many things to say. But watching Walt come and go, the new stoop to his shoulders, the polite way he talked, she knew that it wasn't time yet. Knew, too, that once started, she might say too much. About herself, and the plan she had made with Bert. After it was over, when she knew how it was to be with her, that would be time enough.

The morning before the day of Blake's funeral Margaret woke up very early. You really couldn't call it waking, the hours had been so sleepless. It was more like pushing through a light fog, feeling it melt behind you.

Sara stood beside her bed, dim in the nearly dark room. "Time to get up, honey," she whispered.

Margaret nodded. She reached for her slippers and went noiselessly into her bathroom. She let the shower move over her, cold and sharp, each drop a separate slight pain against her weary body. Enjoy it while you can, she thought, it will be a long time before you have more than bed baths.

She dressed hurriedly, with an economy of gesture that was as new to her as the things she had done and planned in the past three days. When she was ready, Sara took her bag, and they started downstairs.

Margaret paused for a moment at the door of Walt's room. She knew a great desire to throw all of her plans aside, to open that door and go to him and touch his face, his hair, and say,

"Walt, come with me. Walt, be beside me today while I'm waiting, tomorrow while they're doing it, the next day, when I wake in the morning and know whether or not there's hope of my seeing, really seeing, you again."

It took all of her new strength to make her feet move away, her hand lift itself from the knob. I have to do it alone, it's part of it. Alone.

Downstairs she drank a cup of coffee standing up beside the broad kitchen sink. It scalded her tongue a little and, as in the shower, she welcomed the small pain. Hennery came in from the yard, his eyes filled with sleep and love.

"You be good now," he commanded. "Ole Hennery, he take mighty fine care of your house and your mister. Promise true."

Margaret touched his cheek. "I know," she said softly. She handed him the letter from her coat pocket. "Now, mind you, Hennery, you give this to Mr. Walt the first thing when he wakes up, and you tell him nothing. The letter says everything I want to say."

Hennery nodded solemnly. One of his chestnut hands was against his cheek where she had touched it.

Sara took her arm, and they walked across the wide threshold out into the very young day. Margaret turned to look up at the Pillars. What she knew she should feel was lacking. The last time, perhaps, that she would see the magnificence of her home. Home. She shook her head.

The train was on time. She settled herself and signaled Sara to sit beside her. "Never mind the conductor," she said. "I'll take care of him."

Ready to face lions, she thought amusedly. Margaret Wainwright Arrington, the soft, the easy, the cultured, ready to fare forth to test her courage.

She closed her eyes.

Sara asked, "You all right, honey?"

"All right."

Sara said, "I should get me back to Jim Crow. That conductor he going to make a real fuss, I got a feeling in my bones."

"No. Stay here."

The heat of Sara's big body, the overlapping of her round arms, touched against Margaret and made her feel safe, shut off from the aisle full of strangers.

"Sara," she said determinedly, "when you get me settled, I want you to go back home. I shouldn't have brought you."

Sara sounded outraged. "Honey," she cried, "you need me. Don't you?"

Margaret nodded. "I do, and that's exactly why you must go back." She doubted that she could possibly make Sara understand what she herself understood so newly and so slightly. "I have to get myself an inside-out mind, Sara. I have to make my own way this time."

Sara clucked. "You need me," she insisted, sticking to the main stream. "Inside, outside, wrong side, you're talking crazy, honey."

Perhaps Walt, too, wouldn't understand. Perhaps she should have gone to him that first morning, and told him that all of the clutter around her had been burned away in his fire, all of the detailed nothingness that had made up her life. Then she could have told him that what was left, the hard core, was going to have its own testing by fire.

She shook her head again. No, the letter was enough.

In her mind she saw Hennery handing it to him and Walt looking up, tired from the day and night behind him, worried, not knowing where to turn, whether to begin again or give it up, heavy with his years, the quick-stepping, quick-smiling, elastic Walt, limp and old. She saw him open the letter. She read the words with his eyes.

*Walt, dear,*

*Today is a day for starting over.*

*Now please don't jump to any conclusions and think that I*

*am making a drastic move—or running out on you. Or the situation. I don't in the least care what Marshville says. I do care, though, how you feel. About me. About beginning your life again. About Anne Beecham.*

*These are all your decisions, believe me, dear, yours alone. I feel that you cannot come to them quietly and honestly with me about underfoot, the habit of years and the object of your lifelong kindness. I do not want to influence you in any way. I want to help you. That may seem strange to you, considering that you have needed so little from me up to now.*

*I'm going to Baltimore to visit some school friends. I may be gone several weeks. I'll write you an address later. In the meantime, don't worry about me. I have such faith in you, in your wisdom, that I know you won't confuse admiration and affection with other, deeper emotions. Remember our talk, before the fire? I believed then, and I believe even more strongly now, that love is apart from those two fine but lukewarm feelings.*

*I'm not saying this well. But you will know what I mean. You will have a chance to order the materials to start your life again. And that is why I am going. So that I, too, may order the materials to make a new life. A better one, I hope.*

*My love,  
Margaret*

She stared out of the window and watched the miles go by, and the hours, and at last the train braked slowly into the station. Margaret stood up, cut off from her wondering abruptly. It didn't matter. She couldn't picture Walt's face after he finished reading the letter. She couldn't possibly foretell how he would feel, what he would do.

The hospital set her pulses pounding. It was very large. The doctors who looked at her eyes seemed very large, too. They

whispered and nodded and nodded and whispered, and it took most of the day before they called to a nurse, who led Margaret to a room and helped her undress.

It was strange going to bed at twilight without even the suggestion of a headache. Sara stayed for a while, but Margaret shooed her off at last.

"You go visit that Baltimore cousin you've been talking about for years," she commanded. "You can come back tomorrow night and see what's happened."

There were tears in Sara's eyes and the pink palms of her hands patted Margaret's wrist. "I'll go, honey," she promised, "but I wish I could send for Mr. Walt. He got no right not to—"

Margaret spoke sharply. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sara. Good-by."

They gave her tea for dinner and then they did things to her. The last thing was two pills in her mouth. She fell asleep at once. When she woke up, her bedside clock said ten. The room seemed blistered with heat.

She got out of bed, put the window up full, put on her robe and walked down the hall. It was dim and uncanny.

A nurse stopped her at the first corridor.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Walking," Margaret answered. "I'm restless and my room's too hot."

"Walking," the nurse echoed in amazement. "Get back there."

She clucked her to the room, put the window down all but the smallest crack and set a heavy screen around that little area of freshness. She clucked out again.

Margaret lay in the dark. The night before an operation, she thought, must surely be the loneliest time in the world, with tomorrow, a lurking beast ready to grab you—

It came to her slowly, the consciousness of those around her. She heard a low moan. Far off, the echo of a scream, then a raised

voice. The perspiration lifted itself on her forehead, was cold against her body.

She felt it all at once. Pain, concentrated, whole, stabbing. The essence of life struggle. To be born. To die. To patch up enough to keep on going. The siren at the emergency entrance below her, the door slam, the laden arms, the haste—

She turned on the light and sat up. The nurse came in at once.

"What are you up to now?" she asked curtly. "You have an operation early in the morning. You're supposed to get your rest."

"I'm not tired." Margaret stopped. She looked at the nurse. "I can't stand hearing them moan, those people in pain."

The nurse tried to look reasonable. "Are you afraid?" she asked simply.

"Afraid?" Margaret ran the word, like an astringent mouth-wash, through her lips. She considered it from all sides. "No," she said at last. "Only it's all of them—moaning and suffering—"

"Listen," the nurse said tartly, "when they really hurt, they're too weak to waste energy kicking up a fuss. You can bank on it. The ones who squawk the loudest hurt the least."

Margaret thought about that.

"Here," the nurse said, "here are a couple of aspirin. Now go to sleep like a good girl."

She went out, this time leaving the door open. Margaret didn't turn on the light again. After a while she fell asleep. She heard the siren through it.

She dreamed that the operation was over and they had taken the bandages from her eyes. When she opened them, she saw colors brilliantly, fresh washed; lines were sharp, clear. She dreamed that she turned to Walt, who stood beside her bed, and said to him, "It's from the inside-out, Walt, all the beauty and the courage, too."

She dreamed that Walt leaned over her, and every inch of his



skin was there to be examined microscopically. He kissed her, and every pressure of his lips was complete consummation. He said, against her cheek, "I'm so glad you know it, darling. I've been waiting for you to find it out."

She was very happy in her sleep, there in the strange hospital in Baltimore, with even Sara gone from her.

Jerry Young, son of Dr. and Mrs. Bert Young, 110 Main Street, a freshman at State U School of Journalism, has returned to college. He was home briefly for the funeral of his father's cousin, Blake Marcus, who was killed when his car ran off Highway 7X recently. [*Marshville Herald*, April 16]

## 26

After Blake had left her, that day when she needed him so, the morning Bess Marr had been beaten, Jenny walked across to the desk and picked up the manuscript. "Folly Theater," she read, and made no sense of it.

She took it back to Blake's big chair and settled herself. No use tearing up the damned thing before she knew what it was. Blake tapped out all those nights, even if she hated to read, even if it was a slow, difficult, lip-moving process.

It wasn't hard to read once she got started, though, because almost from the beginning she saw herself. It was exciting at first, watching her looks come sharp into words, watching herself move around. She was some girl, this girl in "Folly Theater," this girl who had a way with men and knew what to do with it.

Slowly though, even with her attention held tight, she knew a growing sense of fear. Not outrage. The sentences marched along too true for that. But fear because any man, especially Blake, knew her so well and had such great contempt for her. He laid her bare. He said things that she herself had never had the words for, that she had only felt. They were not nice things. They were, even in the back of her mind, things she did not dare admit.

It took a long time, and the night was all around her before the final yellow page was reached. Jenny looked down at her hands. They were quivering claws in her lap. She touched her eyes. They were hot and wet at the same time. The muscles up the back of her neck were stiff, boardlike, aching.

She stood up suddenly, watching the sheets spill to the floor, like a large deck of cards. Ace of spades, she thought, staring at them. Cards of death. She was shaking all over and her mind cried, "It won't be like that with me. It can't be like that with me. Not Jenny Young. I'm Bert's wife, and he's nuts about me, and I've got a fine home and two kids and everything is safe. I'm young and I'm beautiful. Sure I am. It won't be like that."

She bent over and scooped up the papers, helter-skelter, so that they crumpled and bulged and filled her arms like a load of laundry. She dumped them on the desk and looked around wildly. Then she picked up the big metal wastebasket and tossed them in, crumpling the pages so that they would burn more easily.

The packet of matches on the desk had gold letters on it. They read "Sandra's Beauty Salon," and absently Jenny wondered where Blake had gotten hold of them. She lifted the cover and struck a match. Its small flare was bright and warm. She watched it move delicately down the slim stem of the match. When it nearly touched her fingers, she dropped it quickly into the basket.

The papers caught slowly, fire creeping down the edge of a sheet, across a top. Then they grabbed the flame and played with it, writhing and whispering and doubling their heat. Jenny kept her eyes fixed on the wastebasket, her nose smelling the dry, peculiar odor. Something about the sight and the smell stopped her quivering.

She remembered a morning when she and Bert were first married. She had carried a wicker basket of clothes out to the back yard and stood, straining the tautness of her body high, hanging up the clothes. The sun was exciting on her face and bare arms.

She remembered lifting one arm to her lips. It tasted sweet and young with the sun on it.

She was so full of herself that she felt as if her skin might burst wide open with happiness. So full, that when Bert came up behind her, she swung at once to push herself against him.

"Forgot my case," he had murmured, his mouth moving over her cheek.

"Don't remember it now," she had whispered back. They went into the house together.

It hadn't been bad at all, those first months, she thought now, watching Blake's book turn slowly to scarred black pages, watching the edges eat into the middle, seeing how the black turned to gray, feathery ashes. But then Jerry came along—and the restlessness—and Blake.

The first time she reached into the basket the ashes were too hot. She put her thumb in her mouth and waited. She picked up a pencil and wrote quickly, "To Blake, in return for favors received. Jenny."

She scooped the ashes into the brown envelope. She reached behind the desk and picked up one sheet that had slid away from her. It was the title sheet. She put the envelope neatly in the bottom drawer of the desk, walked quickly across the room, ran down the stairs, and turned hot water on full in the tub.

Lying there she thought of all the things she would say to Blake when he came storming to her. He might even hit her this time. She laughed aloud. And a lot of good it would do him. . . .

A lot of good it did her to wonder about his reactions, Jenny thought in the next days. She never saw Blake again. She never wanted to see him again. The thought of it set her to shaking.

"I don't want to go to the funeral," she said to Bert.

"You'll be there," he answered quietly. "You'll be there on time."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he gave her a sudden

stare, full of—yes—of hate. It scared the breath out of her throat in a sharp gasp. She turned hurriedly and ran from him.

Upstairs she dressed with great care. She took a long time with her make-up. She fixed every strand of hair smoothly into place. She slipped the black chiffon dress over her head, and for a pleasant moment the sight of her skin through the sheer material, the way the dress clung and swirled, took all of her thoughts.

I look like the Merry Widow, she told herself. She did a couple of whirls, there in the guest room, dipped low, rose gracefully, and bowed to herself.

Then the fear came back.

If Bert would only say something. If he would bring it out in the open, so that she could fight him back tooth and nail and tongue, could use the charm that had never failed to wither him, had always brought him to her begging.

But he gave her no chance. Since that morning when he exiled her to this room, when he went upstairs, and she had heard him going through Blake's desk, he had walked through the house as if in his sleep, as if she didn't exist.

There was a knock on the door and Jerry stood there. He looked taller than when he went away to school, and something about his features reminded Jenny of Blake. She shuddered a little.

Jerry said, "Dad wants me to take you to the church. He's already gone."

"My," Jenny said, "you're getting to be a handsome man, Jerry. The girls are going to give you a run for your money."

He said rudely, "Come off it. Let's get going."

Jenny settled the small black hat on her curls. She pulled black gloves on her hands. "How do I look?"

Her son barely glanced at her. "Okay," he muttered. "You're not going to a wedding, you know."

"But everybody will be watching us." She took his arm, not-

ing that she had to reach up for it. "We want to make a good impression."

The sound that came from Jerry was half snort, half laugh, wholly vulgar. "It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

They walked down the steps together. At the foot Sally waited, her hand in Gram's, looking scrubbed and uncomfortable in her best dress.

"What does Uncle Blake do in heaven?" she asked. "Does he just sit?"

Gram said, "Probably be glad to—for a hundred years or so." She avoided Jenny's eyes.

So, nobody wants to speak to me in this family. So what? What did I do? Tore up his lousy stinking book, sure. She lifted her chin. And I had a right to! Who does he think he is—was—to write like that about me?

She tightened her grasp on Jerry's arm, and the fear came swelling back. Not only the fear of Bert's finding out. Also the miserable fright that had attacked her up there in Blake's room the day she did it, the day she read about the girl in Blake's book. The end of the book. The end of the girl.

The church was dim. Jerry sat on one side of her and Sally on the other. She amused herself for a few minutes thinking of how young and fragile she must look, all in black and there beside the two strapping children she had brought into the world. She saw the picture the way she saw the one the traveling photographer took for Mother's Day a few years back. There she sat, chin up, eyes dreamy, with Sally beside her knee, Jerry beside the chair, and Bert in back. Motherhood, beloved, triumphant.

She kept the picture conspicuously on the mantel in its fine old filigreed gold frame. Funny thing. Nobody ever mentioned it.

She turned her head now, looking for Bert. He was standing beside the casket and his hand was on his cousin's head. Making a spectacle of himself, she thought scornfully. He could have

gone in for that sort of thing before the service, before people came. As she watched him, he moved slowly toward her, gave Sally a little push and fitted himself into the end seat of the pew.

Jenny took a deep breath. She leaned over and whispered, "Everybody's here, aren't they?"

Bert looked straight ahead.

She tried again. She moved her hand across Sally and fitted it over Bert's. "Poor Bert," she whispered. "Poor dear."

Bert slipped his hand gently from under hers.

Well, anyhow, nobody saw that. All they saw was the tender way she leaned toward her bereaved husband. She slid her eyes to the pew opposite.

Anne Beecham was on her knees. Her back was straight as a ramrod. None of this comfortable balancing on the seat edge for her, Jenny thought, proper and correct and mush wouldn't melt in her mouth.

The words of the service slid around her. Jenny wouldn't let herself think about them. Other people, sure. But that thing couldn't happen to her. Not for years and years, not until she was so old that she didn't care—and wasn't afraid. You get old enough, you don't care, don't you? Do you?

She turned to Bert. His face looked set and hard and in a mold she hadn't seen before. Suddenly she wanted very much to soften it, even if she always ribbed him because of that softness. She wanted to bring it back. There was something about the way he looked, so white, his lips crowded tight against each other, that made her think the hardness, the whiteness, went right down inside of him, to the middle. Made her think she could beat her fists against him anywhere and there would be no give.

Walt was one of the pallbearers, and Paul. But Margaret wasn't anywhere in the church. Strange. She always had a good word to say to Blake. Once Blake had told Jenny, "You wouldn't recognize it, of course, but Margaret Arrington is a lady."

Ptah. I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to take a trip

to the city and buy some new clothes. I'll stay just as long as I please. I'll let Bert get good and hungry for me and then I'll come back, and it will be all right. It will be fine and dandy, and he'll stop missing Blake.

The service was over, and the sunlight was bright on them there at the entrance to the church, and she still hadn't decided where she wanted to go. New York, or maybe to Chicago. She'd never been to Chicago.

Bert was talking to the man from the funeral home. If she hadn't been looking straight at him, she never would have recognized his white, rigid face. People were all around them, climbing into the rented cars, or their own. Their voices were subdued, but they were also full of a sort of relief.

Jenny thought, They don't fool anybody. They're just as happy to have Blake there in that box as I am. Always happy to have it be the other fellow.

Bert said at her ear, "Come along, Jenny. We're going back to the house for a minute."

Jenny said, "Hey, what's the idea? We'll miss the—"

Bert repeated, "Come along, Jenny. We won't miss anything."

His fingers, his good strong fingers that could do so many gentle things, were sharp as knives on the flesh of her upper arm.

Jenny found her feet moving reluctantly, a slow counterpoint to the fast double beat of her heart. Bert hadn't looked at her, and his voice was soft, but his fingers gave her a message. His fingers said, "Run for your life, you slut. They're not going to lower Blake's body into that grave for nothing."

She tried to pull away, at first so nobody would notice, then with a desperation that was beyond caring what people thought. But Bert gave her only a few inches' leeway. He moved inexorably toward the back door of their home.

"Bert," she gasped, hearing her voice come thin, hearing, too, a strange thread of excitement in it, "Bert, please."

He's the strongest man who's ever touched me, she thought.



The strongest, right here beside me all that time, and I never knew it. How dumb can you be?

"Bert," she repeated, yanking with all her force against the superhuman grasp. "Bert, let me go."

She found herself chattering as he pulled her up the steps, as he pushed her before him through the door, as he shut the door behind him and reached one hand to lock it. "Bert, don't be mad at me. I haven't done anything. Honest. Bert, honey, please, don't look at me like that. Bert. Bert—"

She stared at him then. It wasn't Bert. It was nobody she had ever seen before. It was a man with a white face carved out of stone or something, all lines gone, all life focused in his glittering eyes, no color anywhere, except a thin rim of purple around his pale lips.

"Bert," she whispered weakly.

He let her go. She looked around frantically and discovered that he had backed her into the dead end of the breakfast nook. "Bert," she screamed.

She watched his hand come out of his pocket. It held exactly what she had known it would. A snub-nosed gun with a round eye that pointed precisely at her breast.

He said, this stranger, this calm strange man, "This gives me a great deal of pleasure, Jenny. It is for Blake, his book and his life. It is for Gram, her peace and her comfort. It is for Jerry and Sally, for their lives and a chance to do something with them." He paused. "It is for me, too. But most of all, it is for you."

"No," she screamed shrilly. "No."

He nodded. His voice sounded the way it did when he comforted a dying patient. Quiet, sympathetic. "For you. A quick, clean stop to all the viciousness in you, the cruelty, the ugly passion."

"Bert," she begged, "remember—remember how it was? How it can be again—" All the shaking stopped. The screaming stopped. She stood perfectly still. From some place inside of her, some

place she didn't even know was there, her voice came, simple and sweet. "Bert," it said, "I love you. I've always loved you. I just never knew it till now."

She watched the gun raise an inch, and she watched the fine hand aim it. She glanced quickly at the eyes that hadn't changed with her words and she knew, as simply and sweetly as her voice, that it was true.

Pallbearers at the funeral of  
Blake Marcus Wednesday a week  
ago, were Walt Arrington, George  
Smith, William Martin, Paul  
Beecham, John . . . [*Marshville*  
*Herald*, April 16]

## 27

Walt fitted his hand around one of the silver loops on the casket. He looked across the rounded top and Paul seemed far away at the other side. Blake was not so big a man as this. Yet it was taking twelve strong arms to lift him from the church, to set him in the carefully waxed blackness of Morrison's hearse.

Funny I never knew Blake very well, he thought. He was some years younger, of course, and when he first used to come to Marshville, those week ends, that year or so after Bert was married, he was a big-shot newspaper man. There was a lot of good talk at some of the parties then. I remember Blake standing in the middle of a group of us, answering our questions about world affairs and politics, and I remember sitting somewhere with him before a fire, arguing about ways of life.

He did not seem like such a large man then. Even smaller, later on, when every party ended with somebody lugging him home. When any discussion ended with that cowed look he began to wear, that easy assent, as if he had no right to disagree with you.

He's been a long time sliding, and most likely it feels good to him to have it ended. The way it used to be for Nancy when she was a kid. She would gear herself up so, climbing the ladder of the slippery slide. It would take all of her courage to swing her feet over, so that they hung down, limp and terrified, against the cool metal. She always looked at me then, almost asking,

"Shall I let go? Will you be there to catch me if I let go, Daddy?"

Then she'd take a little breath and whoosh, and she'd be down, and I would have caught her in a tenth of the space it took her to climb, a fraction of a second of the time it takes to grab courage.

Maybe it was like that with Blake—as it is now with me, only I won't think about that. There was nobody to catch Blake once he started down, not Bert or his friendship with Paul, certainly not Jenny.

Walt hitched his hands and moved slowly with the rest of them. Suicide was a thing he could not comprehend. He could understand the misery that might create the desire, but he could not comprehend how a man, a woman, could destroy himself. If it were just a case of letting go, of easing the grip, as he would when Blake's casket was settled firmly within the hearse, it might be possible. Although he had an idea that at the age of ninety Walt Arrington would still be reluctant to release his hold.

The remote feeling came over him again. The distance from the doors of the church to the maw of the hearse seemed to stretch for miles. Walt shook his head, but the odd illusion stayed. He glanced sharply at the people lined up on either side, and they were strangers, as they had been for days. He had known them all his life. The curves and angles of their faces were familiar as the streets of Marshville, as were their gestures, the inflections of their voices. He knew what they were thinking, too. Right now, watching him pace slowly down those miles to the hearse, he knew what they were saying to themselves and most likely to each other.

They were saying in whole what they had said in part to him. That the town was waiting, much of it living on savings, waiting for him to get going again. That they couldn't understand his silence, his evasion, and that he had no right to wander like a lost soul when they depended on him for the simple staples of their lives.

That's what made them strangers, of course. Made everybody a stranger. Paul and Bert and Anne and Margaret. Because they didn't see how it was with him. A man has something in him, a self-starter, a driving rod—whatever it is, it's the ignition that gets him started and the power that keeps him going and makes him what he is. Take that away and you've got nothing but a machine without a motor. No matter how slick it looks outside, the heart's gone out of it.

He tensed his arms for the slight lift of the casket now that the long trip was over. Blake isn't the only one, he thought, who has the right to let go. He's not the only one who had nobody to catch him. He walked toward the lead car. My God, when you're strong and then not strong, there has to be some place to turn.

George Smith was in the middle of the back seat of the car. He was sweating. In all the years Walt had known him, come summer or winter, George was always sweating.

"Mighty nice service," he said heartily. "Wondered for a bit yesterday what old Mike could find to say about Blake. In the line of compliments, y'know. He managed."

From George's other side Paul spoke up curtly. "He managed." He leaned enough over George so that Walt could see his face. "Where's Bert?"

Walt shrugged. "I don't know. Back in the family car?"

Paul shook his head. "Neither he nor Jenny." He sounded worried.

Paul wasn't one of those who asked him about his plans. Walt hadn't talked with Paul since the night he'd seen Anne, the night of the fire. He wondered, staring across the street at a white picket fence, if Paul knew what lived in his house, if he knew how much he had once possessed and had somehow lost. It was hard to tell with a man like Paul.

He put his hand down to his coat pocket and Margaret's letter crackled there. A letter from a stranger, he had thought, reading it. He thought it again. There was nothing of Margaret as he

knew her in the strange words. My wisdom, he thought bitterly, and laughed briefly. All their heads swung toward him.

"Just thought of something," he apologized.

Miz Maude's William climbed into the front seat. "Let's go."

Everybody smiled a little, hearing his rare and rusty voice in brisk command.

George said, as the car pulled away from the curb, "Gonna miss old Blake. Had quite a habit, he did, of stopping in for Cokes. Eight, ten a day sometimes. Quieted his nerves, I guess. Maybe made him think he was getting something stronger. Throat probably got used to swallowing liquid—"

Walt raised his eyebrow at Paul. Paul was looking right at him and there was no friendliness in his eyes. They were blank and considering. Damnation, Walt thought suddenly, he knows I kissed Anne. And the Tuesday night walks! He turned his head away, embarrassment hot in his cheeks.

Then they all know. Margaret and Paul and the whole town probably. Maybe that's why Margaret went away. The hiss of gossip, many voices, whispered in his ears, mixed and muddled.

The Southern Belles: "That poor dear itty-bitty Walt Arrington, 'tisin't enough that his plant burned right to the ground, but he's makin' himself plumb ridiculous over that Anne Beecham."

Miz Maude: "William and I are worried plenty. Seems like Walt ought to have more consideration for his old friends, letting them stay out of work with not an aye, yes, or no about his plans—then letting himself get caught by Paul when he and Anne were—"

Poppy: "My dear, I don't like to hear that. Walt's a fine man."

Martha Evans: "Isn't it enough that he's had a shock? Do you have to kick him, too?"

George Smith: "Bet you did right well—"

But it was George's voice actually in his ear. And George was saying, ". . . on that insurance money. How long you think it'll take to get the plant up and rolling again, Walt?"

Walt was aware of a listening sort of silence in the car. He looked around quickly, feeling trapped. All of them but Paul, George, and William worked at the plant.

"I haven't any idea," he said brusquely. Then he found himself asking, "What's it to you?"

George sat straighter. He seemed about to burst with righteous indignation. "It's plenty to me," he cried angrily. "This town goes down and out, I go along with it. Maybe it's no skin off your nose—you probably got plenty socked away—but the rest of us—"

The car stopped. Walt got out of it heavily. Blake's hidden body seemed to weigh a great deal more than it had at the church. He stood beside the grave, trying not to think, waiting for the service to begin. Martha Evans came to stand beside him, tall and straight. He tried to smile at her.

"Walt," she said, "a thing like this makes you realize about a lot we have, doesn't it?"

He looked at her, awake for a moment with surprise. What a lot you have, Marty, he said to himself. He listed her assets: glasses, peaked face, small business, whining mother—

She nodded, as if he had spoken aloud. "Just to be alive." She looked around in her quick way. "Where is everybody?"

Walt shared her glances dully. There was a solid block of people around the canopied grave, but sorting them out he knew what she meant. No Bert, no Jenny. He looked for Anne Beecham, not because it meant anything any more, but because it had been his first habit for a long time to set his eyes on her, to feel refreshed.

"Margaret's gone to Baltimore," he explained. "Left yesterday morning." Such an odd thing for her to do, not explained by her letter, not explained at all.

Martha nodded again. "I know. I was only surprised you didn't go along."

"Why should I?" Walt countered.

Martha stared at him in surprise. "You—"

Paul's voice interrupted her. "Either of you two people seen my wife?"

The embarrassment was with Walt again. "At the church—"

Martha said, "She walked up toward the corner after the service."

"Alone?"

She nodded.

Paul said, "Probably wanted a little air. The church was stuffy."

Walt said, "She'll be along most likely."

Martha tried to be light. "You keep a good eye on her, don't you, Paul?"

Paul stood still and stared at Walt. "Not quite good enough."

Walt moved toward him. "Listen, Beecham," he said, "you got it all wrong." Now that's a nice phrase, he thought. I've heard it on a dozen radio programs, read it a hundred times. But this is a trite situation.

Paul asked, "Have I?"

Martha said, "There's my mother. Excuse me."

Walt put a hand on Paul's coat. Paul looked at it steadily. Walt took it back.

"Your wife," he said slowly, knowing that it had to be said, "is one of the most exquisite people I've ever known."

"Pretty, eh?"

"Not only physically—but every way. There is a beauty in her that she cannot hide, no matter how hard she tries."

Paul reached through his pockets for cigarettes, realized this was not the time or place to smoke, and brought his hand out again. "You seem to know her pretty well."

Walt agreed. "Pretty well. Not as well as I thought for a while I wanted to." He took a deep breath. "I kissed your wife the other night, Paul."

Paul's eyebrows rose. "I know it. She told me."

It was Walt's turn to be surprised. "If she did," he managed finally, "you know that it was a quiet, friendly good-by. Nothing more."



Paul grinned, a twist of one corner of his mouth. "I'm afraid I didn't give her a chance."

Somebody hissed a "shhh" toward them. They stopped talking abruptly, like two reprimanded schoolboys. Walt tried to keep his mind on the service, but it wouldn't stay there. Why did Martha Evans think he should have gone with Margaret? How did she know about it anyway? If Margaret chose this time to visit friends, it was all the more important that he stay put, play his part in this funeral, face down the gossip that he now knew was all over town.

He moved as unobtrusively as possible toward the back row of onlookers. The rector's voice came softly, and the words were hardly distinguishable to him through the crowd and through his own confusion. He found Martha Evans and stood by her.

The two final plunks of dirt were loud in the stillness. Such a bright day, such a day for asking for a series of days, weeks, years, all just like this one.

"You will have the time to order the materials to start your life again," Margaret said that. It sounded wise, mature, unlike her. The materials of my life, Margaret, are an aging body, a tired mind, a pile of ashes, and money that can't buy me anything I need.

People began to move in small groups across the grass that was as smooth as a golf course, coldly professional somehow and not to be confused with regular grass on the lawns of living people.

Walt called, "Martha—just a minute—"

Martha looked up at him. "Walt, you don't have to explain to me. There's not a word of truth in it and I know it."

"I'm not talking about Anne. I want to know about Margaret. Why did you think I should have—"

Martha sounded hurried. "Nothing, nothing. Me and my big mouth."

"Martha!" Walt cried.

She sighed. "I live a simple life, Walt. Sometimes my imagi-

nation runs away with me." She saw the demand in his eyes, shrugged, and went on. "It was just that Bert told me, a long time ago, he thought something could be done to help Margaret see right again. Then, the day after—after the fire, I stopped in and Sara was crying when she opened the door, blubbering about 'My poor missus, my poor missus.' I saw them on my way to work yesterday morning, heading for the station, Sara helping Margaret for dear life, and both of them looking so serious." She shrugged again. "See, it's nothing."

"What else?" Walt demanded.

"Well," she went on hesitatingly, "Margaret came to me Monday and asked me to get the deeds for the house on Sassafras. She wanted to switch them over to you. Asked me where to sign. She said—" Martha stopped.

"What?" Walt almost yelled.

"She said, 'I'd better sign them now, while I can see a little something at least.'" Martha looked up intently into Walt's face. "Then she hurried out of the place as if she regretted her words. That's all, Walt, honestly."

He said, "Thank you." He walked away from her quickly.

His heart began to beat heavily, the way it had when Margaret started to talk to him that night. It increased its pace, the way it had when he heard that his plant was burning down. He couldn't walk fast enough to keep up with it.

George signaled from the car. "Get a move on, Walt," he called. "I got to open up the store."

Walt climbed in. Paul sat next to him this time. Walt leaned sharply against the armrest, trying not to touch him. He reached into his pocket and brought out Margaret's letter. He had to get this straight.

"... with deeper emotions ... love is apart ... me—the habit of years." The last line now. "So that I, too, may order the materials to make a new life."

George was talking to William. His powerful voice made a screen for Paul's words, spoken softly. "Walt," Paul said, "you're

right. About—her, you know. I was thinking, there at the grave. If I can feel this way about a—a comparatively small thing—”

Walt commanded abruptly, “Shut up, for God’s sake.”

Paul stared at him. And no wonder. Arrington the gracious, the tactful. Everybody’s friend Arrington.

Walt called to the driver, “Let me off at Bert’s and step on it, will you?”

Paul asked, “What’s the matter?” He sounded as if he cared.

“Margaret’s gone to Baltimore.”

“I know that.”

“You don’t know anything. My wife has gone to Baltimore—alone—to have an operation that may leave her blind for life. She’s gone because . . .” He had to finish in his mind. . . . Because she’s got some fool idea that she isn’t good enough for me—*me*—the way she is.

His hands were trembling, he could feel the tears in his eyes. It was all clear. Margaret—helpless, loving, good Margaret. Margaret, the lady, the child, the long-suffering—alone and in pain and not trusting her husband enough to ask for him beside her. “I want to help you,” she’d written.

Paul asked, “You sure?”

Walt just nodded.

Paul said, “You go check with Bert. I’ll get reservations for you on the six o’clock plane. I’ll drive you to the airport. You’ll get there—”

The car stopped. Walt reached for the door.

William’s rusty voice was startled. “Waddayaknow, there’s an ambulance in front of Bert’s.”

They all stared at it. The siren lifted. The ambulance moved rapidly away.

Paul jumped from the car, the rest of them following. Walt reached the house last. He was aware of the scene in the living room, like a tableau. Paul, his hands on Anne’s shoulders, his voice loud, harsh, and angry, crying, “Are you all right? Are you all right?” Anne nodding in a dazed way. Jenny Young, haggard,

undone, twisting on the davenport, animal moans coming from her corded throat.

Walt stared at the aftermath of some unknown tragedy and thought, It will be the biggest hospital in Baltimore, of course. As soon as George gets back in the store I can wire and find out. I can be beside her, like Paul said. She can wake up and I can be beside her.

And about time. A dislike for himself rose sour in his throat. He stared at Anne and he didn't like her much, either. Her hair, her eyes, her calm mysterious manner. Paul! Loose change he's lost. Nickels and dimes. But me! Lord, Lord, how could I have been such a fool!

He raced from the room. For the first time he could remember, Walt Arrington didn't give a damn for anybody else's troubles. He was in a hurry to get to his wife.

Walt Arrington has gone to Baltimore to join his wife, Margaret, who recently underwent an eye operation. A phone call discloses that he will remain there until she is strong enough to return home. [*Marshville Herald*, April 16]

## 28

Anne welcomed the dusk of the church. There had been so much sunshine lately, such a dusty, asking need for rain, that she felt parched with it, as if she herself needed deep shade, to cool the things that ran hot through her mind.

She settled herself quietly in the pew. She looked at the casket, heavily banked with flowers, and remembered how it had been the first time she had seen the frozen serenity which marked Blake's features now.

It was the kids downstairs, in that flat they had lived in when she was ten. The grandmother died, that was it. An old, old lady who told her rosary every hour, and whose face had always seemed lost under a network of wrinkles. Anne could see now the way the grandmother had put a cracker into her toothless mouth, the way the lips, as wrinkled as the skin, had pulled and held around the stuff, softening it for the ancient mouth, the ancient stomach.

"Come on down and see Gram," the kids cried.

Anne held back, fear tight in her throat. But it was a field day for the big family, a day of extra special food and people dropping in, and they wouldn't take No to anything.

Then there had been the first strange shock at the stillness and the deeper amazement that all the wrinkles were gone and

the old mouth filled out unnaturally, so that it was domelike, rounded, as if to say, "Boo."

Anne didn't go near another casket until she was completely adult and had to, of necessity, like now. She stared blankly at Blake's glimmering face in the church. She felt the prayer bench under her knees.

You were supposed to pray for their souls. That's what you were here for, of course. Blake's soul probably needed a lot of prayer, tormented as it was. Or perhaps it had managed to purify itself through all those months of self-denial and the creation of his book. He looked pure up there. Young and pure and untouched, uncaring.

It's not Blake who needs prayers, she thought. Her gaze, as she knew it would, came to rest on the back of Paul's head, up in the front row with the rest of the bearers. Even with his shoulders slumped his rough head rose higher than the rest above the pew.

She watched him as if seeing him for the first time. She studied him quietly. She knew that if this were the first time, if he were to turn and walk back to her, to meet her, she would be impelled to take his hand, to go with him, to do it all over again.

But it wasn't the first time. When Paul walked up the aisle, helping to carry that casket, it would be now, and he had given her an ultimatum. "I want it right or I don't want it at all."

Paul's ultimatum, Bess's, too. Her mind filled with one phrase only, an old phrase and a used one. "Help me. Help me." The service went on without her for what seemed a long time, but at last she was free.

She was in the sunlight and people were talking to her and she couldn't bear it. She started to walk away from the church, slowly at first, then faster.

She was at the corner when she heard the first scream, the scream that was covered by the starting cars, the voices, the solemn scurry half a block away. She found herself running toward the Youngs' porch. She rang the bell and knocked on the

door. Nobody answered. She turned the knob and pushed. The door gave at her touch.

The living room was empty, and the dining room. The sight that met Anne's eyes at the kitchen door stopped her cold. Bert lay sprawled on the clean linoleum, one hand clenched against his heart. In the other, limply, there was a gleaming black gun. His head seemed lost in the bent-over body of Jenny. Jenny, with wild tears streaming down her face, with black hair torn as if by wind, with hands patting and feeling and loving, with lips babbling.

"Bert, darling, darling, Bert, please, Bert. We'll forget it. We'll forget everything. If something happens to you—I wish you'd shot me—you'd killed me—Bert, if I've hurt you—Bert—I didn't mean it—not ever—not ever—"

Anne took a deep breath. "Jenny," she cried sharply.

Jenny didn't hear her. The crooning and the crying went on, keening to the ceiling, filling the room, until Anne felt as if she were breathing through it.

She stepped quickly to Bert's side and took the gun from his hand. For a moment she stood confused, wondering where to put it. She set it at last on the stove and bent down on the other side of him.

With a strength she didn't know she owned, she pulled Jenny's clutching fingers away. Nausea was in her throat as she searched for the wound, the blood.

There was none. Bert lay white and still, his head on Jenny's lap, her tears dropping rhythmically onto his shirt.

Everything was suddenly silent, as if someone had turned off a loud record in the middle of its playing.

"Bert," Jenny whispered at last. "Bert."

Anne looked down at her. "You didn't shoot him?" she asked quietly.

"Me?" Jenny's swollen eyes lay for a moment on Anne and went at once back to Bert. "No. No. He tried to shoot me. But he—all of a sudden—he crumpled up and grabbed his heart. I

never knew he had—Bert.” She put her head down against the disarranged thin gray hair.

Anne jumped up and ran to the window. Down the street it was quiet around the church, with no cars in sight. She picked up the phone and asked for Fairmont Hospital. While she waited, she remembered Bert’s annoyance that there was no hospital in Marshville.

“Emergency,” she said briskly to the voice that answered. “Marshville. Doctor Young. 110 Main Street. Please send an ambulance at once.”

She hung up and turned again to the pair on the floor. She knelt this time beside Jenny. She put her arms around her. Jenny turned her face blindly against Anne’s shoulder. Anne patted her. “Don’t. Be brave. There, there.”

The muffled words came slow and hard. “He should have killed me. He should have. Bert’s so good. With my Old Man. With Gram and Blake and me and the kids. And I’m no good. No good at all.”

Anne pulled Jenny up and led her to the living room. Then she went back to Bert. His eyes were open. He moved his mouth slowly around silence before he managed to say thickly, “Don’t move me.”

Anne shook her head.

He swallowed, a slow, painful process. “Did I—is she—”

Anne shook her head again. “She’s all right. You never fired the gun. Nobody need know, Bert.”

He sighed. “Good girl. Ambulance?”

She nodded.

He tried to smile. Then he said an extraordinary thing. “I—get out of this—you have a baby?”

Tears came stingingly to Anne’s eyes. She nodded once more.

Bert said, clearly now, “If I come back, I want her gone. I never want to see her again.”

From the doorway Jenny’s voice came steadily. She leaned



against the wall. She looked old, wretched, and desperately lonely.

"Anything you want, Bert," she said flatly. "I'll go. I'll go for good. If it will get you well—or make you happy."

The tension of her hope, her waiting, was a humming in the room. It snapped sharply when Bert nodded.

"Good," he whispered. "Good." He closed his left eye and his face seemed suddenly younger, relieved of an intolerable burden.

Jenny walked slowly to him, bent over, awkward for once, unconscious of herself for once, and reached a hand toward his face. Inches away she stopped it. It hung there for a time, infinitely pathetic, symbolic of all human reaching, asking, regret. Then she straightened and moved dazedly toward Anne.

From down the street, whispering, moaning, then screaming, the ambulance came closer.

Inside of Anne something started softly, a matching wail. It was compounded of a strange mixture of hate and love for this pitiful woman, of Blake's dead face which someday would be Paul's, of Joanne's, lifted up and striped with tears, of Bert's, white and tired to finality.

Suddenly the scar tissue around her heart ruptured painfully, blindingly.

Love, she thought clearly, is not a penny to be hoarded like a miser's gold, until it adds up to a secret hidden fortune. Love is to be spent, recklessly, lavishly. Love is a muscle that grows sturdy with its own use. It is an arm stretched outward and down, to encircle, to protect.

She stretched her own arm outward to Jenny, and just the simple doing of it seemed an act of pure love. She led her back to the davenport, and covered her with Gram's afghan.

Through all of Anne, her body, her mind, and yes, through her soul, there inched a warmth. It was as if blood, rich warm blood, moved through veins that had never known its stirring.

The doorbell rang with a wild, high tremolo.

Anne took a deep breath and walked slowly across the room. She reached for the knob of the door. On the other side would be a woman she had seen only once, the ambulance driver, yet she opened the door as if she were flinging it and all doors wide and welcoming to the whole world.

Mrs. Bert Young has moved from Marshville. Her temporary address is Riverside Hotel, Reno, Nevada. [*Marshville Herald*, April 16]

## 29

Anne had gone, and Paul, and Walt, and all the rest of them. Jenny and Gram and the kids were alone in the house. It was still as death in every room, and Jenny walked through all of them. She touched things. She stood for a long time in the dead-end corner of the breakfast nook and wished that they had pulled her, bleeding and done for, from it.

It got to be night, and she shook her head when Gram offered her food. The kids went to bed, in awed silence, and she went upstairs too. She went into the guest room where Bert had put her and she started to collect her possessions, slowly and neatly, and put them in suitcases. There wasn't room for all the dresses. She sat down and wrote a note to Gram.

"Put the rest of the clothes in the trunk in the attic," she wrote. She remembered a glossy ad in a fashion magazine, one she'd cut out daydreaming of a glamorous trip west. "Send them to me, care Riverside Hotel in Reno, Nevada." She held the pencil over the paper for a very long time. There were some feelings in her that wanted to go down from her shoulder to her fingers, connect with the pencil, and come out on the paper. But she couldn't make them move and after a while she stopped trying. She propped the note up on the dresser and lugged the suitcases down the stairs, trying to be quiet.

When she had piled them on the front porch, she went back into the house and upstairs again. It was too warm for her fur coat, but it was easier to wear it than carry it. She scooped all

of her jewelry into her purse. She wanted to take a look at Sally, at Jerry, but she didn't dare risk it.

In the kitchen she fumbled through the drawers until she found her mother's battered old recipe book which she tucked into her pocket. When the little noise came at the door she whirled, terrified and guilty.

Gram stood in the doorway, her thin old hair hanging like a witch's on either side of her face. Her mouth was a straight line.

"What you doing, Jenny? Running out?"

Jenny pressed against the cupboard to make herself stand straight. "You could call it that."

"You're not even going to wait to see if he pulls through, that it?"

Jenny nodded.

"It isn't like you, Jenny. Bert—dies—you'll be well off the rest of your life."

"He won't die," Jenny said. Don't let him die. Let him have some good time left. Without me. Let him have it.

Gram's face crumpled. "I wish I could be so sure. Blake—now this—" Her shoulders moved with her struggle not to let go.

Gram, Jenny cried silently, Gram.

"I gotta go now," she said aloud. "I can't wait any longer." She pushed herself across the room and around the old lady. Lavender, she smelled like, and always had.

Gram didn't try to stop her. She's learned, Jenny thought, it's no use trying to make me do anything. I'm hopeless, I am.

Without turning, Gram asked, "Where you going?"

"That divorce place." Jenny stared straight ahead. "Reno."

Gram's voice was mean for a change. "If he dies, you may be able to spare yourself the need."

"He won't die, I tell you," Jenny cried, fiercely this time.

"You've fixed it, I suppose?"

I've fixed it, Jenny thought. Anyhow, I tried to. It wasn't easy walking up the church steps, being there alone in the early dusk,

afraid somebody would see her, afraid of the memory of Blake's coffin, there at the foot of the altar. It wasn't easy to get down on her knees, remembering Anne and holding herself straight. It was a long, long time before the words would come. When they did, they came out loud and frightening in the gloomy musty place.

"I made a promise," she heard herself say. "I said get him well, I'd go. I'd stay gone. Get him well. I'm going. Get him well. Bert."

What do you do now? You get up and go home and pack and Bert gets well. A promise is a promise and her half of it would be kept.

She and Gram just stood there. She knew what they both were waiting for. For the shriek of the phone, the voice of Paul Beecham. "I'll call as soon as they really know anything—or if he—he—"

Let Gram wait for it, Jenny thought. I have to get out of here. If I don't I'm going to turn around and run to that old lady and blubber all over her. She'll be kind and hold me, and I'll never get away, and Bert will come back and here I'll be, and it'll be the same thing all over again.

She moved as fast as her high heels would let her toward the outside door through which they had carried Bert, white and still and gasping. She stood with her hand on the knob.

"I'm sorry," she said, and it was a monstrous big thing to say. It was bigger than anything she had said in her whole life.

She didn't know whether Gram heard it or not. She shut the door behind her and picked up the suitcase. She walked down the dimly lit streets to the Four Corners. There was nobody awake anywhere. Nobody waiting up to see. The night was hers, as it must have been Bert's all those times he dragged himself out of bed to go help somebody.

There was the *Herald*, the paper store, George Smith's drug-store. She glanced up the street to the dim white trunks of the Pillars. As she neared the highway, she pulled the smell of the marshes into her nose, letting it stay there. Some people grow

up on an ocean, you take them away, they never rightly do get their breaths again. Those times she'd gone to the city, after a while the dust and dry cement felt as if they would choke her sure, and she had to come back to get the moist, musty coolness of the marshes into her. Had to.

She reached the highway at last and sat on the suitcases at the side of the road, waiting for the bus that would swing up to the gas station sometime. Behind her the village of Marshville turned its back and answered no questions. Not if Bert would live. Not if Jerry would grow up to be somebody. Not if Sally would be pretty at eighteen. Not if Gram had heard her. Heard her say, "I'm sorry."

The village of Marshville, and beyond that Paw and the county hospital, and beyond that Joe and the gray shack, and beyond that, way beyond, almost too far to touch, Maw and her weary voice.

"Maw," Jenny whispered. "Maw."

Then a bright Cadillac convertible pulled into the station, and a man's hearty voice cried, "Fill 'er up!"

Hearty male eyes reached out to Jenny. After a while she could feel them. Not closely. Just knowing they were there. The footsteps came nearer. The big curly head leaned down toward her.

"You waiting for a bus, ma'am?" the voice asked. "I'm going to the city, if you'd cotton to a lift."

Slowly she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She felt her lips turn up into a smile, and for a brief, terrible moment she hated them for their movement, their automatic invitation. Then she said, letting the smile tremble out into her voice, "I'd cotton to it."

The pupils of the man's eyes seemed to come to a point, and he puckered his own lips into a low, soft whistle.

"Well," he murmured. "Well." Then he asked, "Ready?"

"Ready!" Jenny answered, putting her hand in his to be pulled to her feet.

| All Marshville is hoping for the  
| recovery of their good friend Dr.  
| Bert Young, who suffered a stroke  
| ten days ago and has been in the  
| Fairmount Hospital ever since.  
| ... [*Marshville Herald*, April 16]

### 30

Paul pulled the string and the overhead bulb threw a circle of light around his desk, leaving the rest of the front room of the *Herald* in darkness. He sat down heavily in the old chair and stared straight in front of him.

Bert had to live. After all these hours of hanging on, he had to. But the head-shaking of the doctors—

“Go on home and get some sleep, Mr. Beecham. There’s nothing you can do here.”

Nothing to tell Gram. No way to relieve the unbelievably trembling voice that answered his call on the first ring. She can’t bear it if anything happens to Bert, too, Paul thought. And neither can I. You can stand just so much waste, and then life gets off-angle, crooked, all the colors mixed and tangled. Blake was enough thrown away.

He spread out his arms on the desk and put his head down on them. He couldn’t think straight through the heavy fatigue that pushed against him. He had to write an item about Bert’s condition. Everybody would want to know. But the very act of sitting up straight, of pulling the old typewriter table toward him, of trying to compose a few sentences, was too much effort. Everything was too much effort, which was probably the way Blake felt, and Bert maybe, and even Walt Arrington. You keep on trying and trying, and you slip back two steps for each one forward, and it’s all uphill.

He closed his eyes and against the blackness he knew what was the matter with him. He knew that in those moments, there in Bert's living room, when he had shaken Anne and cried out to her and she had clutched him, there was no ultimatum for him. It had seemed so wise and felt so right to tell Anne he wanted everything or nothing. But it had been just so much damned foolishness. He wanted anything. Any little thing that Anne would throw his way, just so he could be with her, could see her and touch her sometimes, and know that she was alive.

A nasty dry sob choked his throat. Right in their hands, their four hands, all of the stuff that Bert didn't have, and never had had, and never would have. And they'd wasted it, just like he'd told Anne. They had so much of value and they'd put such a miserable low price on it. The precious, precious time would go by, the waste would keep on, and he would be tired to death with it, and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. Because without Anne there was no manhood in him. Only the hope of its being right again had stood between him and the sort of despair that Blake must have known.

It was a fearful dependence to admit. It wiped out the slow self-realization of the past months and put him right back in the gray car turning into Marshville, the car that probably never would run again since Blake had put it to his own specific use.

He didn't know she was there until she spoke. He didn't hear the click of the door, hidden as he was, like an ostrich, in the dark tent of his arms and his thoughts, with his breathing thick in his ears.

She said, "It's very late, Paul. You must be tired."

He kept his head down, rubbing his closed eyes slowly back and forth against the sleeve of his jacket.

"I've been with Gram," she added. She sounded strained, her usually clear voice thin. "She finally dozed off. I left Joanne asleep with Sally."

News report, he thought. He couldn't seem to force himself to raise his head and face her.



"Jenny's gone, you know—" Her voice broke suddenly.

Paul held his breath. That way he could hear her breathing. It was quick and shallow.

"Paul," she cried suddenly. "Fools, idiots—all of us. Hunting and searching and not knowing—" She was sobbing now, pulling the words up harshly. "You and I worse than all. No, not you. You've been so patient, so humble. Just me. You tried to tell me. When—when Blake— Paul?"

He stayed down where he was in the blackness, afraid. He had to be sure of this. He had to let her go on. He heard the lightness of her footsteps and knew that she had come closer.

"Everything you said—that morning—it was true. All this time what we had—what we have. A gift, Paul. More than the rest of them—more than Bert—"

Paul felt moisture come into his own eyes at the gasping of her breath, the struggle of her words.

"I—" She stopped. Then she flung it at him, strong and wild. "I love you. I love you, darling. Paul. Hear me? I love you more than anything in the world."

The waiting in him stopped, and he lifted his head quickly and swung around in the chair. He stood up in one easy movement. There was no tiredness in him. Nothing but strength and a power that was greater than anything he'd ever dreamed.

She stood six feet away from him. Her hair was loose around her face and all of her face was wet and shining and haggard with the emotions that rode it. Her tall body shook. Her hands were stretched a little toward him. The shaking was all through Paul, too.

He let himself look at her eyes. It was terrible to see her like this. Rumpled, he'd wanted once. Now she was torn, beyond rumpling. Torn from one thing, and oh, God, it was terrible, but it was wonderful. With love for him. With tenderness. With the desire for life. There in her eyes, in the words she had said. Love for him, Paul Beecham.

He knew that in a moment he would go to her. That he would

hold his wife close as he never had before, in a way that was different and deeper and richer and that made all of their previous union childlike and instinctive. In a moment he would.

But right now, in this breathless shaking space, before the touch of flesh could change it, he had to take the look that was in her eyes and make it part of himself, to live with, to grow on, to remember as he lay dying.

Then the moment was over, and they were together.

The Arringtons' Sara is back from Baltimore, and is readying the Pillars for the return of Margaret and Walt, which, according to Sara's report (and her activity), should be soon. [*Marshville Herald*, April 23]

### 31

When Margaret Arrington woke up in the hospital in Baltimore, it wasn't at all like the dream she'd had the night before the operation. In the first place, there were bandages on her eyes so she couldn't open them to clarity and color. She tried to lift her lids. They were clamped down by layers and layers of cotton and gauze. There was a blackness that was darker than any sleep.

She lay very still, trying to accustom herself to it. There was the chance, she told herself quietly, that this blackness would be her comrade the rest of her days, and she might as well get the feel of it before she asked.

Somewhere in the room there was the rustle of a starched skirt. The nurse. Somewhere there was the slight scrape of a chair. Sara? Far off, there was the feeling rather than sound of moving feet and busy hands. Far off, too, there was the questing upward whistle of a bird. They had no way of knowing she was awake. She wondered if it would be like that later, if she would seem to be moving about in slumber, with closed lids.

Margaret cleared her throat. A hand came down instantly over her own, which lay linked together on the stiff sheet. It was a big hand with strong hard fingers, and she knew at once that it wasn't chocolate brown on top and pink in the palm. She knew at once whose hand it was. She lay very still, letting it communicate with her.

You wouldn't think a hand could talk, but this one had things to say to her that she had been waiting all the barren middle years of her life to hear. There was tenderness in it, and that she was used to and discounted at once. But the pressure of the hard dry palm, the tension of the fingers, the almost imperceptible twitching, sent a power into her own limp hands. Her fingers reached up to the hand above, as arms would reach around a neck, and clasped the fingers as lips would seek and clasp. The hand responded, fiercely, with passion, with youth, with a strange, lovely kind of relief.

"Walt," she whispered.

There was no space for more words. The lips did come then. They came upon hers and there was no gentleness in them. No "good little girl, this is for you." No "poor dear Margaret, my helpless little wife." Whatever the hand had suggested, the lips told her definitely, completely.

It put light behind the bandages. Blinding sunlight and dancing stars.

The nurse's voice was crisp and startled, as it had been last night when Margaret wandered. "Enough of that," she cried. Then her voice changed as Walt's lips moved away from Margaret's. "Now, Mr. Arrington," she said gently. "Please, sir."

I want to see, Margaret thought frantically. I have to see what is on his face that makes her speak so tenderly. Her hands fumbled in the air. After a moment they came to rest on Walt's cheeks, stubbled and harsh against her fingers, and wet. Wet.

All of the things she had dreamed of saying to him went away somewhere, blown by their unimportance, the colossal unimportance of words. There was no need to tell Walt about inside-out and change and courage. No need at all.

Instead Margaret found herself saying in the calmest of tones, "You know, Walt, it doesn't have to be a new building. You could use the plans for the old one. With changes here and there where you made additions—"

Only the nurse's little gasp reminded her that she had said the

wrong thing. She should have asked first whether she would ever be able to see again. In the darkness there, with Walt's face against her fingers, Margaret smiled to herself. She heard the nurse's footsteps walk out of the room and down the hall.

She could feel Walt swallow, he was still so close to her. "Margaret," he whispered, and she would never have known his voice. Then he pulled away a little, his voice stronger. "It could be, couldn't it? And the machines—there are those models to go by—" He stopped. His hair touched her cheek as he shook his head. "No," he finished sharply.

You're able to tell quite a bit in the dark, Margaret thought wonderingly. You can piece things together, tones and voices and movements, and find out quite a bit. She spoke quickly, "Don't think about whether you can't or can, or how old we are, or how much work it is. Don't think about the plant burned down and gone. That's yesterday, Walt."

And so is the house on Sassafras Street, she found herself thinking, and who wants yesterday?

He put his cheek back against hers. "Yesterday—you were here alone and I—I—"

Margaret's hands went eagerly to find Walt's face. She pulled him close until his lips were on hers again. She had to push him away at last. She said breathlessly, "Let me say it before she comes back, before the doctor gets here. Walt, you can do anything. Dearest, we can do anything—"

"We—"

"We," she repeated firmly. "The whole town is depending on us."

Walt's tone was wry. "They've already made me very aware of the fact."

"They have a right to, Walt," Margaret went on earnestly. "You've become sort of a symbol to them. The plant, even the Pillars." She thought a moment. "As long as everything was all right with Walt Arrington, all was right with Marshville. Do you see?"

"You're making me bigger than life-size, Margaret, and I don't feel it."

"But you will, you must! And if you can start again, they can, too, of course."

Walt said, "We. You said we."

"Perhaps I won't be able to—to see, Walt."

"You'll see," Walt said loudly, and he sounded like Walt Arrington for the first time since the fire, a man whose vitality and confidence a whole town could depend on.

Margaret sighed contentedly. He was back again. Maybe to stay only for a little while. But she knew that when his confidence waned, when the job got to be too much for him and he was tired, he would turn to her for help. She knew too, and it was a wonderful knowledge, that there was strength in her to give that help.

"You'll see," Walt went on, and a thread of excitement began to weave into his voice. "We'll take those plans and make them into—"

The nurse's voice preceded the opening of the door, her tone one of professional gaiety. "Here she is, doctor," she chattered brightly. "And so far she hasn't even asked about her eyes, imagine that!"

Margaret felt Walt brace himself. She felt the doctor move closer, felt them all around her bed. She took a deep steady breath and waited.

You could never make the nurse understand, nor Walt, nor anybody, how it was at this moment. You could never tell them that sight was a precious thing, but that there were many ways of seeing, and without the one way, the others were not of much account. Only you could understand, and it was a thing you were almost afraid to admit, that the way Walt's hand came on yours and the assurances it gave you, were more important than anything you could see in the outside world.

"Good morning, Mrs. Arrington," the doctor said quietly. Then she felt his light steady touch on the bandages.

Those previously employed, or those interested in employment with the Arrington Knitting Mills, are asked to register now at the temporary office on Lambeth Street. Files are being made for all kinds of positions. [*Marshville Herald*, May 7]

## 32

When they first brought Bert home, he lay for many days and nights in the big double bed in the guest room. He lay without speaking, and with his eyes closed. He didn't try to smile at Gram when her eager and hopeful face came near him. He let Jerry pile pillows behind his back and feed him careful spoonfuls of Gram's clear soups and thick yellow custards, but he didn't look directly at his son, either. He wouldn't let Sally in the room at all.

Time telescoped for him. Lying there, feeling only one side of himself alive, time had a halfness, too. The hours were minutes, and each one of them huddled tight against the next, unwilling to let go, without the courage to stand alone.

The day came though, as he had known it would, when time stretched out thin, and minutes became hours.

It was no special morning. Just another one. The one when Bert Young woke up and knew with a certainty that there was going to be a future and that there were some things he had to face, and this was the day he would begin to face them.

The first thing, as a physician, that he was forced to look at, was his own body. His eyes, from the vantage height of three pillows, scanned down the counterpane to his feet. With great slowness he raised his left hand and pulled the thin blanket aside.

There didn't seem to be much but bones at first, bones held taut by a thin layer of too-white skin. Aging skin at that. The shoulder, the elbow, the wrist, the finger, the hip, the thigh, the knee, the tibia, the ankle bone of the right side were held by more than taut flesh. They were held, lifeless and frozen, by dead nerves. Bert knew, because he had seen it so often, that there was no power on earth which could oil those joints, make the muscles pull smoothly up and back and around. He knew, too, by feeling gently with his left hand, that one edge of his mouth was pinned down toward his chin, and that his right eyelid drooped at the corner.

His mind went off in a tangent of song. "The ankle bone's connected with the shin bone. The shin bone's connected with . . ." He let the tune run its course, and it seemed to take a very long time. But when it finally left his mind swept clean again, he noted by the bedside clock that only fifteen minutes had passed.

This was going to be a day when he would have plenty of time.

So Bert Young was to be one of those men who grow old in a wide bed, who spend a few hours a day being pushed around in a wheel chair, and a few more on the front porch of his home, a blanket over his knees, watching the world go by. He was to be a man who had been weary for a long, long time, and who now had the remainder of his life to do nothing but rest.

He let himself look around the room, for the first time really seeing it. It was as crammed with flowers as the church had been for Blake. They smelled no different. They were still part of the earth, and promising the world's return to it. There were cards neatly set beside each vase. Bert gagged a little. The odor, the formal symbols of friendship, were too rich for him.

While he had lain there with his eyes closed, Gram told him, and Jerry, and even his doctor friend from Fairmount, that they had never seen anything like it. The procession of people to Doc Young's door, the constant ringing of the telephone, the letters and notes and telegrams, and, of course, the flowers.

Gram said, "The whole county purely loves you, Bert. You



must get well for them. They couldn't stand your going." She touched the pulled tip of his lip with one of her distorted fingers. "Nor could I, boy," she added softly, and hobbled away from him.

At least once every day Jerry ran up the stairs, opened the door and said, "Dad, Walt Arrington's here." Or, "Dad, Paul Beecham would like to come up." Miz Maude, Martha, Zeke, George Smith, Hennery, and Sara, and all of the others, black and white, who didn't belong to the town, but who were of the foggy stretches of the night, bad back roads, deep ruts, and rain that slapped against the windshield of his old car. At one time or another they stood downstairs in the hallway and asked to see him.

Filled with what? With gratitude for a baby born safely, a sore healed cleanly, a leg set properly for future use. Or with nervousness against the sight of a changed man, the down-pull of his half-dead face, the limp arm and leg. He felt them there downstairs, saw them lined up like the queue at the ticket window of the old movie theater when a really good picture came to town. And he shook his head, as much as he could, so that Jerry would know his answer.

All the yesterdays, he did. Today was different. Today he wanted to see someone. He moved his eyes toward the bedside table and saw there the little bell which Gram had hopefully placed.

"You want anything you just jiggle this and I'll come a-run-nin'." She laughed. "Runnin', me."

Bert thought then, It's hard for her. We'll have to fix the room behind my office into a bedroom. She can't take these stairs.

He reached an inch at a time for the bell. His left arm felt weak and thin as a baby's. But the slowness was not all physical. It was part reluctance to start the thing going, to take the first step away from this safe and private world.

The bell made a silver sound in the room, bouncing against the flowers, knocking the clapper against the hollow of his chest. From the reaches of the house Bert heard light, quick footsteps,

heard their race up the stairs, until the door opened with a loudness that put the bell to shame.

Sally ran over to his bed. "I heard it first," she cried breathlessly, "and Gram tried to stop me, but I said it was for me and it is, isn't it, Daddy?"

There was nothing on her small eager face that acknowledged his changed appearance. She saw him whole and as he had always been to her.

Bert took a breath, like pushing on the starter of a very old car. He got the mechanics into motion, cautiously, deliberately, and forced the rusty carburetor of his voice box to vibrate against his throat.

"For you, of course, baby." The words had a thickness, as if they were wrapped in wet cotton. "I wanted to see you first of all."

If he tried hard and moved his tongue very carefully, he could make the words distinguishable.

Sally giggled. "You sound funny." She set herself companionably on the bed beside him.

He tried a smile and waited for her reaction. She smiled brightly back at him and patted his dead hand. So far, so good. "I feel funny," he admitted.

She nodded again. "Sure. Everybody says you'll be better though. Everybody says it." She wriggled and scratched a bite on the calf of her leg. "It's very nice to have you sick," she went on calmly. "People bring good things to eat, and Gram hums a lot and Jerry's home. Gram says you won't—" She stopped. There was confusion on her face. "But maybe it isn't nice for you," she finished slowly.

Gram's voice came from the hall. "Sally Young, you get downstairs this minute." She appeared in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Bert. The first time you're perky enough to make yourself known, and this young one gets ahead of me—"

"It's all right," he managed slowly.

Gram looked startled for a moment. Then tears jumped

harshly to her eyes, and her mouth trembled. "Git," she said fiercely to Sally. "Git." Her voice trembled, too.

Sally leaned over and kissed Bert on his good cheek. "No more just late at night," she whispered exultantly. "We'll talk all the time now." She ran from the room.

Bert said, "Don't cry, Gram."

"Who's crying?" Gram sniffled.

"Why?"

Gram blew her nose on the handkerchief she pulled from her apron pocket. "Doctor said most likely you wouldn't be able to talk. And you're talking."

The muscles in the good side of his throat knotted. Of course, he thought, I have no right to be talking. He tried to speak, but nothing moved, no old starter, no carburetor. He closed his eyes again.

When he awoke Jerry was beside the bed, long legs crossed, a yellow pad on his knees and a pencil zigging like a cardiograph across it.

Bert said, before his conscious mind denied him the ability, "I want to see Anne Beecham. Right away."

The pad fell to the floor, the pencil jerked in Jerry's hand. The boy's eyes were green. Bert hadn't realized it for a long time. He couldn't look at them.

Jerry said, "Sure, Dad, sure."

He stumbled over the corner of the chair and the edge of the rug in his haste to get to the door.

Now, Bert told himself, it's started. She knows. She saw the gun. She knows you tried to kill her. Her. Her. Name her. Say Jenny.

In the quiet of the cool room he spoke out the name of his wife. It didn't come thickly. It was as clear as the little silver bell, as impersonal, as tinkling, and even more meaningless. Because for once, saying Jenny, the bell wasn't asking something, calling help, calling hate. It was just a bell, with a minute pendulum

striking against a curved bit of metal in a rhythmic pattern of two syllables. *Jen-ny. Jen-ny.*

He let it hit against him, over and over again. It moved him inexorably toward the approaching moments with Anne, and back toward that walk up the street with Jenny's arm clutched in his hands, toward the opening of the back door, the time in the kitchen. . . .

Anne said from the doorway, "Hello, Bert." She made it sound just right.

With her voice that scene in the kitchen was upon him and the bells were no longer silver, no longer single. There were ten of them, twenty, a hundred, large and small. They tinkled and echoed and jingled and chimed and reverberated, until the room, the village, the world, was full of the sound of bells. *Jen-ny. Jen-ny. Jenny. Jenny. Jenny Jenny Jenny.*

At last the feeling of Anne's hands got through to him, and he knew that they had been smoothing him for a long time, through the clamor of the bells, the sounds that came from his half throat, his half mouth. They were cool and they held a slight pressure. After an immeasurable while, the bells began to move away, making room for Anne's voice, a space for her words to come.

"It's all right," she was saying. "All right." Over and over.

"I am a murderer," Bert heard himself say distinctly. "I am a murderer in my heart. I would have killed her. My hand, the one that held the gun, is dead. It always will be. Because I held the gun and I am a murderer. They come, the people all come, with love for me. And they're thankful for my life. But they don't know that I'd take life as well as give it, that I would have killed if I could."

He stopped because there was no more breath to reach for. The air hunger came to him and he sucked and sucked to get a little of the precious stuff into his closed lungs.

Anne's hands went right on as if he had not moved, her voice as if he had not spoken. "It's all right. All right."

When he grew quiet, Anne began to talk.

"You know and I know," she said gently. "You think that you are a killer. I know you are not. I drove out the marsh highway one day while you were in the hospital. I stopped at the place where Blake's car had—had gone. The grasses are grown up again and there is nothing to show. I took the gun and I weighted it with a round stone. I threw it out into the swampland."

Bert found himself listening to the soft voice intently, as a child listens, waiting for the next great revelation.

"I am a little afraid of the marshes," Anne admitted. "But I sat there for a long time. It was beautiful and strange, and there were a lot of birds."

She shook her head. "I just sat and thought. After a while I knew something. I hope you will know it, too, and believe it, because if you do, you cannot feel—" She lifted her hands and moved them palms outward in a shrug. Then she tried again. "I think I am right."

Bert lifted his left hand toward her. She took it between both of hers. She leaned near him and looked steadily into his eyes.

"Bert," she said, "the reason your arm is paralyzed is because you held the gun. Yes. But not as punishment for holding it, for aiming it." She spoke slowly, making every word distinct and separate. "The reason you are paralyzed is because you, the real you—inside—couldn't bear the thought of killing. You wouldn't let yourself." She stared hard at him, and then got up and went to the window and stood quietly.

For Bert it was a Ferris wheel, taking its colors around and around in a dark night. Margaret was with him, and he had thought, Psychosomatic. He closed his eyes against the late afternoon sun that circled and fluttered around Anne's still figure.

She said, embarrassedly, and he knew that it would be that way with them for a time, "We won't talk about this again, Bert. The thing for you to do is to get well, isn't it? Then you'll know what's next."

Bert took shyness from her. "Yes. Thank you, Anne." He

thought, it's been this way with some of my patients when they've told me too much about themselves and regret it.

Anne said, "I thought you might like to know. Paul and I are going to adopt Joanne Marr." She made it an exchange. Almost at once the embarrassment eased a little.

"I'm glad." Bert found that he really was.

Anne seemed to be waiting there by the window. She turned at last. "Margaret sees more clearly every day. A wonderful success the doctors say. She and Walt are full of plans—"

Bert cleared his throat.

Anne moved quickly to the side of the bed and knelt there. Something is new about her, Bert thought, something good.

"You did that," she said intensely. "You gave Margaret her sight."

Bert tried to smile. "No," he said. Some instinct told him vaguely where she was heading.

"Yes," she insisted.

He stalled. "I'm tired."

"I'll go." Anne put her face near his. "I'll go, Bert. But I made you a promise. I want to keep it."

He closed his eyes.

"But I can't keep it without you. Paul and I want our baby, Bert. Now. Will you help us?"

Bert swallowed and tried to speak. It took a while, and his voice was thick and furry again. "I can't help anybody," he managed.

"You can," she said firmly. "You can start with our baby. You can go on from there."

A little tickle touched the live part of Bert's throat.

Anne set her lips quickly against the turned-down corner of his mouth, then stood up and left without another word. Bert listened to the light shuffle of her feet on the carpeted stairs, the faraway sound of her voice and Gram's, the front door opening and shutting.

This day, he knew, he had faced his problems squarely: his half

still body, his wife, and his guilt. The hours were getting back into relation with each other, neither desperately huddled nor pulled out thin.

There was, then, only one thing for him to face every hour of the days ahead of him. That was how Bert Young, the harried, busy doctor who had spent his life going out to meet the world, could manage to live, immobile and quiet, waiting for the world to come to him.

A day at a time, he thought quietly. Anne was probably wrong, as he could have been wrong about Margaret. But there was the little chance that she might be right, she could be. At least she had opened a path for his mind to go. She had placed in his hands more than his present capacity could absorb. Her life and that of her child. Which was a gift, indeed.

Peace, he thought, watching the window go blue-gray, doesn't have to be a positive emotion with radiance in it. Peace can be absence of pain, as I've seen, giving a sedative to one who has waited hours for me in suffering.

Perhaps you could build a life on peace, on not being tormented by the body and passion and guilt and remorse. At least it would be worth a try, in the absence of other things.

If he could have moved, he would have rolled over on his side and curled up like a child. As he couldn't, he took the deepest breath he could and presently went to sleep.

A true thing. Just as a story may be picked up anywhere, so it may be dropped. The moating of dust is wiped clean for a little, showing the gloss and pattern underneath, but the dust will settle back after a short while.

The tourist, caught by accident in Marshville, may pull hard on the steering wheel of his big car and zoom the motor into powerful life—past the Four Corners, away from the quiet pool, back once again into the racing water of the highway, shallow and moving.

It didn't matter to him where the story began, and it is nothing to him where it ends, nor that it contained happiness and unhappiness. He has his own story to live, anyhow. There is his car in the stream of cars, and his thoughts, emotions, dreams, ambitions. There is his destination. Hours go by and he is far away from Marshville, the little town he touched briefly because he needed gas, or took the wrong turn.

Hours go by and the tourist sleeps. Everybody sleeps. It takes time some nights to release the tensions, through prayer, through love-making, through cautious thinking, through self-deceit, through hope. But the hour comes to each person, in every place, when the brain and the body and the heart have had enough. They drop into darkness and become part of the great nothingness.

Marshville, as all towns everywhere, lies a black dot in a black world, its lights snuffed out, quiet in sleep, unaware of itself for a fraction of time, purifying its elements and gathering its strength to continue the story which has no end.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Although THE RIGHT PLACE FOR LOVE is her first novel, Charlotte Edwards is well known to magazine readers across the country. She has published some sixty stories in all, in The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Ladies' Home Journal, Woman's Home Companion, McCall's, Today's Woman, Woman's Day, and elsewhere. She has been writing short stories for eight years and before that worked on newspapers and in radio in Rochester, New York, and Dayton, Ohio. She was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, and graduated from Lake Erie College in Painesville, Ohio. Today her home is in Pomona, California, where she lives with her husband, Donald T. Edwards, and their seven-year-old son Thomas.*









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